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The Rio Kid Western

FALL ISSUE

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By RICHARD BRISTER

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A Complete Bob Pryor Novel
By TOM CURRY

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By TOM CURRY

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A department conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

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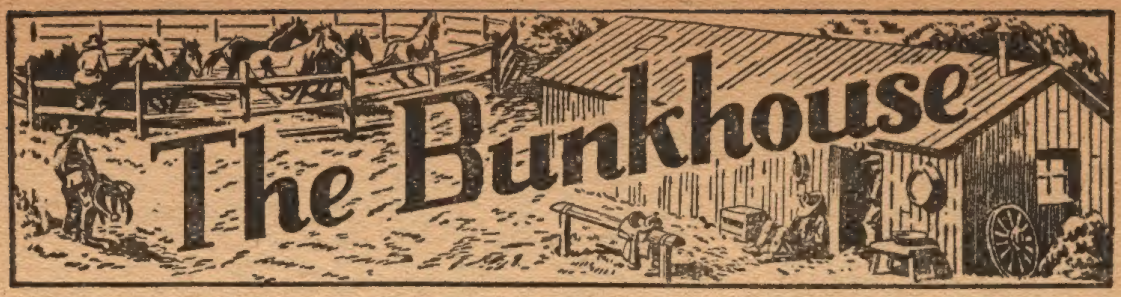

A Department for Readers Conducted by FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI, WADDIES, let's gather around in the old Bunkhouse once more and spin a few yarns of the West, that section of our country where the cowboys' bunkhouses originated.

If you remember at our last Bunkhouse meeting we took an imaginary trip to Oklahoma and met Adjutant General Frank M. Canton, along with Ben Cravens and a number of Oklahoma outlaws, and we may take another trip to the same state this time, and the reason for this trip is a motion picture I saw a short time ago which was supposed to depict early days of a part of that state. It was a swell picture, a dandy story, but so inaccurate in some details that I went to see it the second time just to check on it and pick out the discrepancies.

The picture depicted the opening of the Cherokee Strip on April 22nd, 1889, and showed great hordes of people on foot and in every conceivable conveyance of that time racing to the interior of what is now Oklahoma, each one of course eager to beat the others and stake out a claim, as the land was free to those who staked their claims first.

That part of the picture was a swell reproduction of the actual land rush, and while I was a little too young to be in that rush I have a very good mental picture of it, as the man who had more to do with that '89ers land rush than most anyone else, the late Major Gordon W. Lillie (Pawnee Bill) and I staged a reproduction of that run on the state capitol grounds at Oklahoma City, April 22nd, 1926, in conjunction with the '89ers Annual Celebration.

The Boomers

Major Lillie was the man who helped hold in check near the Kansas-Oklahoma line a large portion of the great horde of people called "Boomers" who were awaiting the firing of the gun at high noon on April 22nd, 1889, for the start of the run.

In the picture, however, Tulsa, or that section of country that is now adjacent to the oil metropolis, is shown as being the destination of the principals in the drama, while as a matter of fact the run was made to a section further west, to that section of country where Oklahoma City and Guthrie are now located.

In one scene of the picture there was a great rambling wooden structure, and on the front of the building a huge sign "Saloon," while as a matter of fact there was a federal law prohibiting the possession or sale of intoxicating liquors in that section of the Territory and on any of the Indian reservations.

For many years after the opening of the Cherokee Strip or the '89ers land rush, armed guards very often searched the trains as they entered the Territory, and if they came across any grip or package that to them looked as though it might contain alcoholic beverages, they simply opened it to see for themselves.

Men who brought liquor into the Territory in grips on the train almost always sat their grips down in one part of the train and took seats in another, and then if the law opened the grips and found the contraband, the owner of the grip just lost the grip and its contents and never acknowledged that it was his property.

Pioneer Days

There was plenty of lawlessness shown in the picture, and this part the director did not have to overdo, because there were plenty of badmen in that section of the country in those early days of what is now a great and prosperous state.

Oklahoma in the early days was what might be termed a melting pot of many classes and creeds. Some of the range country in Texas had been settled and the Texas country's cowmen had drifted north with their cattle, ranging over the Panhandle and into the Indian Territory, leasing hundreds of sections of grazing lands from the Indians for practically nothing. They were nearer the cattle markets, the Indians were not molesting them seriously and the cattle business was thriving.

These cattlemen believed that the country was and should always be kept strictly a cattle country. They were very much against such a great cattle country being cut up into farms.

(Continued on page 8)

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

Like the old saying, "Many men of many minds," there were now many men of many characters, the ranges were now ridden by a lot of carefree spirits assembled from many parts of the world, from widely diversified strata of society and from various previous occupations. Some of them came to the new country because their new associates would not be too curious about their past lives or their former names; some came running away from secret sorrows to become melancholy, silent brooders among their livelier friends; some came for sheer love of wild nature or adventure; some were already there because they had grown up with the land and were a natural part of it.

Rebellious Hombres

Their environment developed them as individuals in an unorganized social group. For lack of social organization, they, as individuals, solved their problems quickly and without compunction, often with flaming six-guns delivering death most carelessly.

On the whole they were much like a lot of wild, spoiled boys. They worked hard, fought bitterly, and played intensely. Few of them had the inherent qualities that make outlaws and criminals, but many of them became outlaws and criminals because civilization was more or less forced upon them, compelling them to adapt themselves to a routine of existence which they detested, to conventional

(Continued on page 75)

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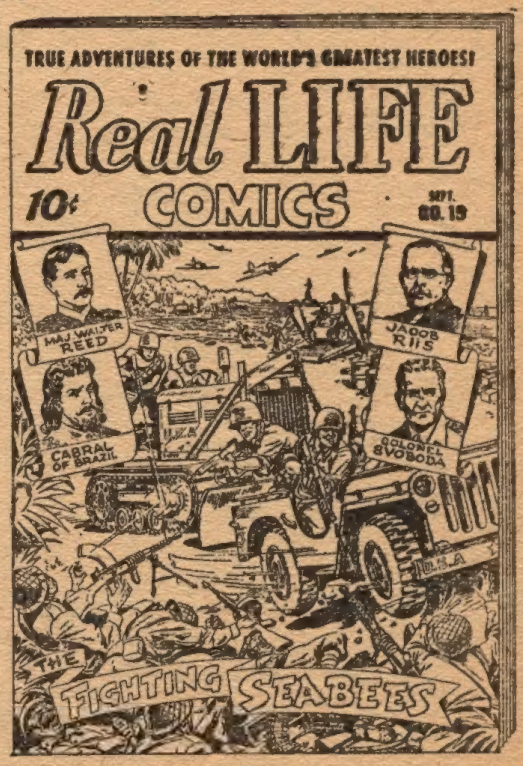

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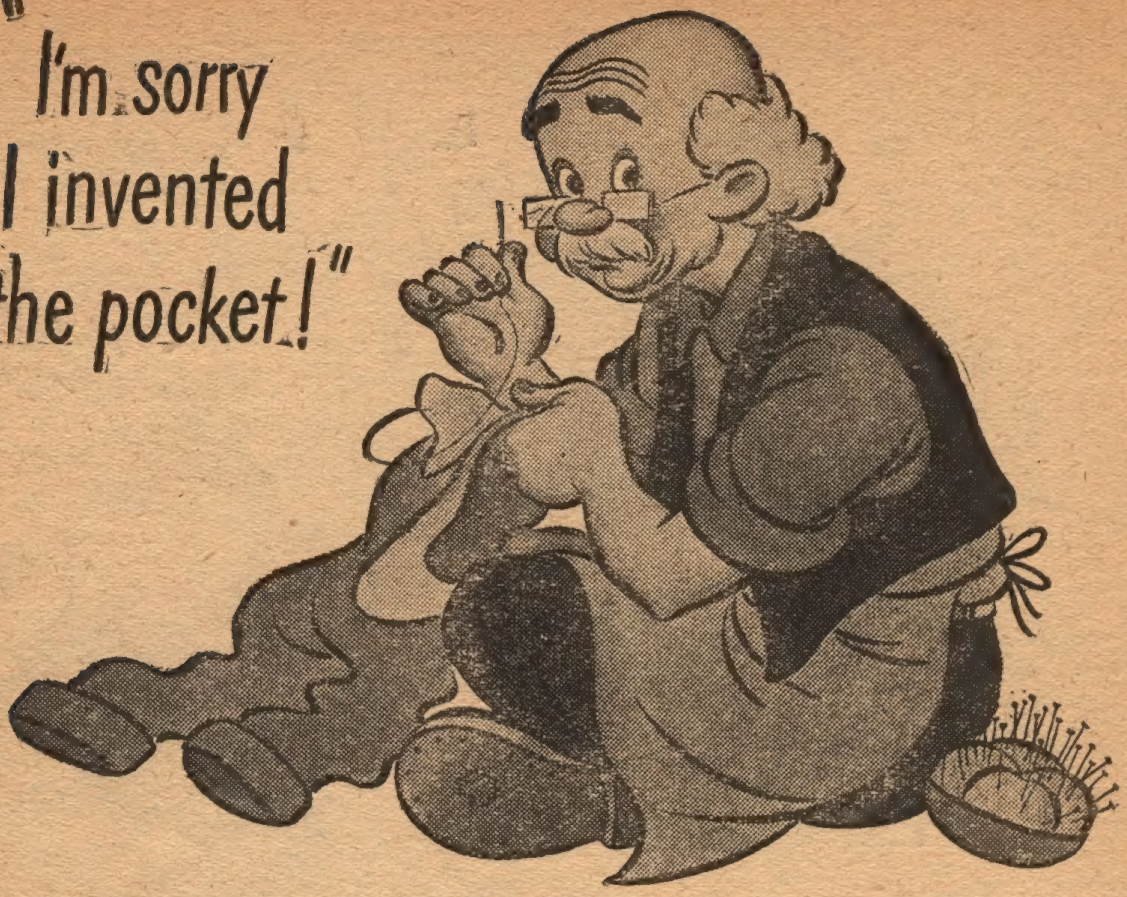
"I'm sorry I invented the pocket!"



IF I HAD KNOWN that some Americans would be using pockets to hold all the extra money they're making these days, I never would have invented them.

Pockets are good places to keep hands warm.

Pockets are good places to hold keys . . . and loose change for carfare and newspapers.

But pockets are no place for *any* kind of money except actual expense money these days.

The place—the *only* place—for money above living expenses is in War Bonds.

Bonds buy bullets for soldiers.

Bonds buy security for your old age.

Bonds buy education for your kids.

Bonds buy things you'll need later—that you can't buy now.

Bonds buy peace of mind—knowing that your money is in the fight.

Reach into the pocket I invented. Take out all that extra cash. Invest it in interest-bearing War Bonds.

You'll make me very happy if you do.

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The three riders tore on as the men from the river kept charging (CHAPTER III)

SIERRA GOLD

By TOM CURRY

The Rio Kid rides with guns flaming in a roaring battle against swindling sidewinders who plague honest settlers!

CHAPTER I

Black Bart

THE deep, hollow voice in which the order came startled the stage-coach driver and the passengers riding inside.

"Throw down the box!"

The horses shied, snorting in alarm as a sinister figure stepped into the road.

The eyes of the double-barreled shotgun were no more terrifying than the slits in the flour sack which the road-agent wore over his head as a mask. The shapeless sack made the bandit appear huge in the vision of his frightened victims. The ordinary linen duster covering his legs to the boot tops, and other common gear seemed extraordinary in that feverish moment.

"Black Bart!" shouted the driver.

With a convulsive movement, he kicked the express box into the road. It had been riding under his long legs, doubled up on the high seat atop the Concord stage. A devil-may-

A COMPLETE CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR NOVEL

care ribbon-twister as a rule, that driver called Marty felt his throat grow constricted and dry as he realized who had him covered.

White faces showed, unmoving, in the windows of the stage-coach. Everybody had heard of the terrible Black Bart, who loomed a giant in the imaginations of men. Elusive, mysterious, Black Bart struck as he pleased in central and northern California.

Seeing a pretty girl among those looking out, the robber politely bowed from the waist, the flour sack rustling.

"Do not be alarmed, miss," he said. "I won't harm you." To Marty he said, "Driver, get down and turn the horses loose."

There was no idea of disobedience in Marty's shocked mind. Black Bart's reputation made it impossible for him to attempt fight. Quickly the stage driver unhitched the skittery horses. As soon as they felt the traces loosened they bolted, ripping the reins from Marty's hands, and ran madly down the rocky road of the mountain pass, disappearing quickly around the turn.

The bandit with the flour sack with its sinister eye slits covering his head and shoulders, seized the express box. It was marked "Wells-Fargo Express Co.," in black printed letters on the front. It was heavy with gold from the placer mines of the northern Sierras.

With his booty, Black Bart backed off and disappeared into the manzanita at the side of the pass, fading through the camouflaged gap as suddenly as he had come. Somewhere near was his horse, and the stage was stranded.

THE driver stood as still as a statue, staring at the wall of brownish-green bush. Right there little else but bush could be seen, save the strip of sunny blue sky above, the reddish sides of the cut and some big boulders flanking the winding road.

The stage-coach door opened and a man with a heavy body clad in a traveler's gray duster burst from the vehicle. A felt hat with a curved brim was cocked on his thick brown hair. A whitish, slanting scar on his upper lip was half hidden in the bristling mustache. His jowels bulged, and he pulled in his chin, evidently a habit when angry or excited. His dark-brown eyes flashed, and in a strong, blunt-fingered hand he gripped a big Colt's revolver, the hammer held back by a thick thumb.

"After him, driver!" he roared, a harsh note to his bass voice. "Are you a yellow-bellied coward?"

Marty sniffed, and turned, the spell broken. "That was Black Bart, mister! If yuh're so all-fired tough why didn't yuh let him have it when he was takin' the box?"

"Shucks, I would have, but I expected he'd step back closer to rob the passengers."

"Black Bart don't trouble the passengers," snapped Marty. "It's the box he's after."

"Be careful, Mr. Kedwin," called a girl, whose anxious face was at the window. "That robber may not have gone far." And she said to someone else. "Please, Father! Stay inside. I'm afraid you may be hurt."

"No, no, Edith, my dear," came a man's voice from inside. "I'll just get out and stretch."

There were four passengers in the stage-coach, and now all of them got out, for they were stranded, without the horses. Fred Kedwin, the belligerent, heavy fellow, started through the bush, gun in hand, as though to pursue Black Bart. A thinner, slighter man with a drooping left eyelid, black hair and a sallow, dark-complexioned face, trailed after him. He was "Smoky" Lownes, Kedwin's companion.

The father of the girl who had been called Edith—Colonel Timothy Thorpe—stretched himself as he stood in the rocky road. He wore a blue suit with a swallowtail coat, and fine black boots. He was a splendid-looking man of about fifty, with white hair and goatee. His eyes were clear, but open and frank. His very bearing gave the impression of an honest, fine personality. His white stock came high up on his throat, and covered the V made by the neck of his frock coat. His voice was cultured, when he spoke with his Southern accent, and his erect carriage showed his military training.

Edith, his daughter, was slim and young. Thick, dark hair was piled high on her head, and her dark eyes were large and long-lashed.

She took her father's arm, and kept close to him, as though to guard and be guarded. Her manner and her anxious glances into the colonel face showed her deep affection for him, and it was fully returned in kind.

Edith Thorpe had, in fact, been her father's constant companion and only comfort in life since the colonel's wife, Edith's mother, had died during the Civil War, still new in the minds and hearts of men and women. Mrs. Thorpe had died of heartbreak when Edith's brother had been killed fighting for the Confederacy at Gettysburg.

The colonel himself had been wounded at Bull Run, but that hurt had been mild compared with his anguish at the loss of wife and son. Now Edith was everything in life to him, as he was to her. She gloried in the strength he had found to stifle his grief and carry on, and would follow him wherever he might lead, as she was doing now. For father and daughter had come to California, the new land of promise, to start a new life.

To that end, Colonel Thorpe, who had lost his plantation in Georgia, his wealth, had liquidated what little he had left and taken this long trek, hoping at least for peace—and what happiness there might be left in life.

Fred Kedwin and his friend Lownes did not pursue Black Bart for long. Edith and her father heard the crackling of the dry manzanita, still brown after the winter and just starting to show a few green shoots in the fresh spring, and presently the burly Kedwin and his companion appeared. Kedwin brushed

"We might as well take it easy, gentlemen," remarked Colonel Thorpe, as he and his daughter sat down on a flat rock at the side of the road. "I reckon it'll be some time before we continue our journey." His musical voice was pleasingly mellow. Any words would have sounded well, uttered in the softly-slurred cadence that was the mark of the high-born Southerner.

"It's irritating!" exclaimed Kedwin, impatiently. "We're only an hour or two from the mine, Colonel. I wanted to show it to you

BOB PRYOR

clinging leaves and sticks from his fine trousers, fitting tight about his thick calves.

"He's gone," he said shortly. "No sign of him. There are too many thorns in there to keep on looking."

Marty, the driver, grinned. "I reckon yuh didn't run *too* fast tryin' to catch up with Black Bart," he drawled dryly. "Oh, well, I'm goin' after the hosses."

"I'll report you for cowardice, driver!" snapped Kedwin.

MARTY shifted his tobacco cud from one leathery cheek to the other, staring at Kedwin. Then he grinned again, turned, and trudged around the rock bluff which jutted at the turn.

before dark today. I have so many important matters on my hands just now that delay upsets me. For one thing, I've got to be back in San Francisco by Thursday, to keep an appointment with Governor Stanford."

"It's a shame, suh." Thorpe nodded. "But we can't help it."

An hour passed, and still Marty did not return with the runaway horses. The sun was warm yet, but it was dropping in the sky.

"Why doesn't that fool driver come back?" fumed Kedwin, who had been smoking innumerable cigarettes, waiting for the horses to be brought back.

Then the wind brought them the *clop-clop* of horses' hoofs on the stony road. Kedwin and Lownes moved in the direction of the

sound, to where they could see a section of the back trail along which the stage had come. A trio of riders stirred up the reddish dust as they came into sight.

From where they stood they could view the brown blanket of Sierras that was turning to fresh green, although spring still was young. Poplars, willows, oaks, manzanita and toyon with bright red berries from the past season covered the hills. For mile on mile the wild mountains rose against the horizon, and in them were a thousand places to offer haven to Black Bart or any man who wished to hide. East and southeast reared white-capped peaks of the mighty Sierra Nevada, most perfect and magnificent of American ranges. The cool air was aromatic and bracing.

Kedwin's booted feet were spread and he kept a hand in his pocket on the hidden gun there as he watched the approaching riders.

"Tough-lookin' hombres, Boss," murmured Smoky Lownes, his drooping eyelid fluttering.

Kedwin glanced quickly around and satisfied himself that Colonel Thorpe and Edith were far enough away not to overhear what was said.

"What of it," Kedwin said to Lownes. "An encounter with a few more tough hombres won't affect our deal with the old goat. I want to get on, though. I've got him in just the right frame of mind right now."

"He ain't got but a few thousand of his own," reminded Lownes.

"His friends back where he came from have plenty, put together. And Thorpe'll sell the mine to them, once he's hooked. I need big money."

"S'pose Thorpe and his friends get mad at us?"

Kedwin shrugged. "Zaldini has twenty fighting men to take care of that. Once the deal's consummated, Thorpe'll be blamed by his friends. And they won't have a leg to stand on as far as we're concerned. If they attack us—well, we'll be ready to defend ourselves." Then he said, "Quiet, now! Here comes Thorpe."

CHAPTER II

Riders of the Sierra

AGAIN the stranded stagecoach passengers were startled by a strange voice, but this time it was the drawling voice of the leader of the three horsemen who reined in where they stood in the road.

"Howdy, ma'am—and howdy to you, gents!"

The rider who spoke gave a military salute and a smile to the passengers as he brought up his snorting dun. It was a long-legged mount he rode, one with a gray coat, and with the black stripe down the spine that marked the animal as one of "the breed that never dies." The dun had stamina, too—that was plain—since he showed far less fatigue than the other two mounts after pulling up the steep grade.

"Good day, my man," said Kedwin, condescendingly. "You've come just in time to help us out. We were held up by Black Bart, the notorious robber, and we've lost our horses. I'll give you twenty-five dollars for the loan of yours to Stirling. Just hitch two of 'em up. Yours will do, and that yellow cayuse."

The leader of the trio of riders blinked, surprised for a moment at Kedwin's breezy assurance. His quick, blue-eyed glance sought the deep-set eyes of one of his riding mates, a tall, rangy fellow with a flowing, tawny mustache, and whose expression never changed as he sat his black mustang.

The blue-eyed man cleared his throat, and his voice was softly drawling as he replied:

"Suh, I'm Bob Pryor, mostly called the Rio Kid. This is my friend, Wyatt Earp, and the hombre over there on what yuh call the yellow cayuse is my trail pardner, Celestino Mireles. We're strangers in these parts ourselves, and would like to help other strangers out. But I don't reckon yuh'd like our hosses hitched to yore stage."

"Why not?" snapped Kedwin. "We're in a hurry, and want to get on. I'll pay you for them."

"These mustangs won't stand for traces and somethin' bangin' behind 'em," explained the Rio Kid. "It would be yore last ride."

He smiled, an infectious smile, and Edith Thorpe and her father smiled back at the handsome rider. Something in this Rio Kid's bearing told the colonel that the man was a product of military training, in all probability had been an officer—and he was right, although Captain Bob Pryor had looked into the mouths of flaming cannons on the opposite side of the conflict in which Colonel Thorpe had seen service—and lost so much.

Though born on the Rio Grande, the Rio Kid had enlisted in the Union Army at the beginning of the Civil War. He had been impassioned in his determination to fight bitterly to keep the Union intact. He had fought under Custer and Sheridan, as a cavalry officer, and had made an enviable record. But at the end of the war he had found himself uprooted from all that had been familiar to him, and he had become one of those restless men who rode the wild trails of the West in search of excitement.

The Frontier towns knew him, knew his daring, and knew well he could be depended on to fight still—now for the bewildered and oppressed wherever he found them.

In his devil-may-care blue eyes was reckless courage and strength. He had a straight nose, crisp chestnut hair, and his smooth bronzed cheeks glowed with health from his outdoor

The Rio Kid and Mireles rapped bullets at the attackers
[CHAPTER IX]

life. Broad at the shoulders, tapering to a fighting man's waist, and with a powerful chest, the Rio Kid was the ideal height and weight for a cavalryman.

He wore a dark cavalry Stetson, a Union-blue jacket, and a three-inch-wide black leather belt supported the two Colts he carried in sight. Two more were hidden in shoulder holsters. From his silver spurs, his shining black soldier boots and whipcord breeches, to the top of his hat, the Rio Kid was the picture of neatness. Life in the Army and an inherent passion for order were training that kept him surprisingly well-groomed and trim, even on the road.

Bob Pryor was young to be a veteran of the Civil War. But he had fought through it all. He, too, had been at Gettysburg, but he had come through it alive, as he had through other big battles. Having been a captain of cavalry, it was not strange that another fighting man, Colonel Thorpe, should have recognized an air of command about the Rio Kid, and in his voice.

Saber, the horse he rode, was a veteran of the war, also, though that was not so evident at first glance. Saber was not prepossessing in appearance, but he was the fastest mustang the Rio Kid had ever known. His fiery temper had been of value in battle, but now that battles with cannon were over, he had never become mild, especially with strangers. Saber did not like strangers, and he proved that now as he bared his teeth, threatening Kedwin when the bulky man stepped too close.

"Keep that brute under control, you!" shouted Kedwin.

"Yuh see?" drawled the Rio Kid. "It's like I told yuh.

"He'd turn around and bite yore leg off if I hitched him up."

SECRETLY he was amused at the burly man's pomposity. He kept a rather grave face, however—until he looked again at the girl, who was watching him. Then he smiled. She was beautiful, all right, and he felt his heart leap as he looked at her.

Her red lips parted and for an instant she and the Rio Kid gazed straight into each other's eyes. The admiration in the Rio Kid's glance was so plain that Edith lowered her long-lashed lids.

Colonel Thorpe stepped forward.

"Happy to know you, suh," he said cordially. "I am Colonel Timothy Thorpe, recently of the C. S. A. My daughter, Edith. These gentlemen are Major Fred Kedwin and Mr. Dan Lownes. We were traveling together to see a mine of Major Kedwin's—I am hunting for a profitable investment the major said he might offer me—when we were held up by the robber, Black Bart, as Kedwin has told you. Could you help us, do you think?" Thorpe's soft voice was politely persuasive.

"I wish you would," said Edith.

The Rio Kid dismounted. "I'll shore do all I can and so'll the boys," he promised. "Mebbe there's a ranch near here where we could pick up some hosses, in case the driver don't find the ones yuh had."

Wyatt Earp also dismounted, to stretch his long legs. He was six feet tall, broad of shoulders, rangy. His thick, tawny hair matched his mustache, and his blue eyes were deep-set. He wore leather pants and a brown shirt and jacket. A single Colt's six-shooter rode in a pleated open holster at his bony hip.

The other of the trio of riders, Celestino Mireles, was a young Mexican. His slim body was clad in characteristic velvet garb. His tight-fitting trousers were trimmed with conchas, and he wore a high-peaked sombrero. Sideburns adorned his proud, dark face with its hawklike, patrician nose. He was the Rio Kid's constant trail-mate, and together they had ridden the Western trails ever since Pryor had snatched Mireles from death in Old Mexico, when the young Mexican had thrown in his lot with his rescuer, whom he chose to call "My General."

Glancing now and then at Edith Thorpe, the Rio Kid thought that never had he seen a girl who appealed to him as she did, nor one whose voice was so alluring.

He did not care for Kedwin especially, for the burly major had spoken to him as though to an inferior, and men like the Rio Kid and Wyatt Earp were quick to take offense. Both were gunfighters, and free as the air they breathed. Usually they made their own law, living by a code of ethics that was rough, but decent, and neither considered any man his superior.

The Rio Kid was puzzling over what could be done for these stranded passengers when Marty, the stage driver, trudged to the brink of the rise and sang out to them.

"Them all-fired cussed hosses—'scuse me, ma'am—are gone to blazes—'scuse me, ma'am—and further!"

"My friends and I will ride on and pick up hosses at the nearest place, Colonel Thorpe," said the Rio Kid. "Just a while ago I saw some smoke beyond here, in the valley. A ranch, I reckon. Come on, boys."

He saluted, smiled at Edith, and hit leather. He, Earp, and Mireles galloped to the brow of the rise and through the gap where Black Bart had held up the stage.

"S'pose we cut down the slope, boys?" suggested the Rio Kid. "We can make it, and that smoke is a lot closer that way."

A wave of his arm indicated the plume of wood smoke in the clear air. They could see the silver ribbon of a little river in the valley, and while there were some black ravines on either side, the way looked passable for horses.

Taking the lead, the Rio Kid broke through the manzanita and snaked down a rocky slope. He soon cut a narrow trail where his quick eye picked up fresh hoof treads.

"Say!" he remarked. "I wonder if Black Bart come this way!"

"I'd like to come up with that sidewinder, fair and square," observed Wyatt Earp.

"Me, too, Wyatt."

That was a natural desire on the part of both men. Earp was a law officer, and the Rio Kid had had a crack at hunting down robbers and killers himself on occasion.

"Ees a box zere," said Celestino suddenly, pointing to the side of the trail.

They drew up, and Pryor dismounted, staring down at the smashed Wells-Fargo box. Some papers remained in it, but the gold bags were gone.

Black Bart had left the old axe with which he had smashed open the strongbox. Pinned to the chest was a way-bill. Curiously, the Rio Kid picked it up, for something had been written on it. He began to grin, dryly, as he read the verse printed in pencil:

I've labored long and hard for bread,
For honor and for riches.
But on my corns too long you've trod,
You fine haired sons-of-witches!

Wyatt Earp laughed. "That's a good one! A poetic road-agent!"

"Yeah. But we better move on. Them stranded folks are in a hurry. That young lady has beautiful eyes, hasn't she?"

"Hear that gunfire?" broke in Earp. "It's right ahead!"

THEY swung on toward the ranch. Rifle and pistols were banging in the hills, just over the next rise, screened by manzanita. The Rio Kid felt the quickening of his blood and Saber, his dun war-horse, snorted in excitement and spurted forward. That battle-trained animal enjoyed a scrap as much as his rider did.

"Say, mebbe Black Bart run into some trouble at that!" exclaimed Pryor, topping the rise.

He was looking down over the river valley where he could see some running cattle near the silver stream which watered the beautiful, wide range. A dozen riders were driving several steers before them, and four other men who had caught them rustling were trying to check them.

The Rio Kid took all this in at a glance.

"Looks like that gang was runnin' off some cows and got caught in the act!" he shouted to Mireles and Earp.

Even as he spoke, the Rio Kid saw other riders moving swiftly in through broken bush. A line of horsemen was snaking up to the rear of the defenders while the main bunch kept the cowmen busy. They were moving behind a low spur which hid them from the punchers who were trying to stop the rustling. Within a few minutes they would reach the point where they could riddle the already badly outnumbered, but fighting cowmen.

CHAPTER III

Square V

JOHNNY VALE'S face was red with anger as he worked his short-barreled carbine. He was seeking to save his cattle and drive off the gang of thieves he had come up with, and it seemed a hopeless proposition since he had only three cowboys with him, men who rode for the Square V.

One of them, "Shorty" Manners, on Vale's right, was a stocky, brave young fellow who had been with him for two years. The others were "Red" Phillips and Ben Agnes, trusted employes.

"Give 'em thunder, boys!" Johnny shouted. "That's the gang that's been stealin' our beefs the past week!"

They were up above the creek bottoms, and had some cover from rocks on the hillside. Intent on the dozen shooting from the creek, Vale and his men did not see the eight riders creeping in from their rear, getting closer and closer.

The red lights flamed brighter in Johnny Vale's dark eyes as he battled the rustlers. He was a fighting man, though just turned twenty-five—a strong, powerful, big-bodied young fellow in a blue shirt, fancy vest, leather chaps, expensive half-boots with silver spurs, and a fawn-colored Stetson. His hair was thick and black, and his jaw strong and determined.

The horse he rode bore a Square V brand, as did the mustangs of his cowboys. The ranch belonged to him. It was not a big outfit in comparison to some spreads, but he made a good living from it, and he loved the life, and would die in defense of his own.

"Watch yore left!"

Over the crackling of guns, Vale caught that stentorian voice, from his rear. He whirled his bronc, and a bullet shrieked past his ear, not an inch from him. His movement had saved him.

Vale glimpsed the huge rider in black togs —he had seen that fellow before, at a distance —who had just fired on him from the low cross ridge, a fault running up from the river. He had an impression of a dark-skinned face, gleaming big white teeth, and flaming eyes. Then he saw that more men had sneaked around him and his boys to destroy them.

"Down, boys!" he bawled.

Shorty cursed, and sagged from his saddle. A slug had taken him in the right shoulder and blood spurted from the wound.

Vale let go at the new menace from the ridge, trying to give his boys time to cover. The dozen rustlers at the creek whooped it up

in triumph, and started to charge the slope to cut Vale off. Vale's mustang suddenly jumped, and sank to earth.

And it was at this moment, when Johnny Vale thought he was about to die with his men, that he became aware of a new factor in the swift battle.

The man who had shouted the warning to him, and two other riders swept up, their Colts blazing. The black-togged rascal at the end of the low ridge and his followers were also aware that others had taken chips in the game. Lead was clipping them, accurately, and two men felt the bite of it.

"Zaldini!" gasped an attacking rustler. "I'm hit!"

"Get back, cuss you," shouted the man in black, called Zaldini. "They got us right!"

The Rio Kid, Wyatt Earp and Mireles had them in plain view. Roaring guns echoed in the valley, and the cursing Zaldini whipped his stallion around and led the retreat from the ridge.

The three men who had saved Johnny Vale tore on, cutting around the upper end of the ridge, coming toward him, and the leader of the oncoming trio waved encouragement to the young rancher. Not yet aware that Zaldini had been dislodged, the dozen men coming on from the river kept on charging.

Vale and his two remaining men—Shorty lay in a heap on the reddish earth nearby—could concentrate on the main gang. And then the three riders who had come to the rescue rode up to help—a handsome, reckless young rider on a dun mount, a tall, leonine fellow with imperturbable courage, and a hard-fighting young Mexican.

"Zaldini!" bellowed a wild-eyed rustler, low over a brick-colored mustang as he led the charge up the slope. "Where are yuh?"

But Zaldini was retiring in confusion. The added Colts and carbines of the Rio Kid and his friends checked the charge, and the gunnies turned and ran, leaving the cows behind as they crossed the river and made for the other side of the big valley.

"Thanks, mister," Johnny Vale said, looking up at the grinning Rio Kid. "Yuh shore saved our hides!"

"Don't mention it. Fact is, we're huntin' for the owner of that ranch over there. It's you, ain't it?"

Vale nodded. "That's me. That gang was runnin' off some of my cows. They've took some before, and we were layin' for 'em. They're from up there in the mountains." He swept a long arm toward the rising hills on the north, the source of the river. "Wait'll I see how bad Shorty's hit."

THE Rio Kid dismounted and joined him. They squatted near the wounded puncher Shorty was unconscious, breathing hard.

"I guess it punctured his lung," growled Vale

The Rio Kid shook his head. "Don't think so. He's shocked, that's all. Looks like a clean hole through the shoulder. It oughtn't to lay him up for long." The Civil War had made the Rio Kid an expert on wounds. "Let's take him back to the house."

They loaded Shorty on a horse and Vale got up behind to hold him steady. As they moved off he introduced himself.

"I'm Johnny Vale, gents, and like yuh guessed, this is my ranch, the Square V. The boys are Red Phillips and that's Ben Agnes. Shorty Manners is this hurt one."

"Glad to know yuh, Vale," said the lithe fellow on the dun. "I'm Bob Pryor, the feller some folks call the Rio Kid. This here is Wyatt Earp, and Celestino Mireles, pards of mine. We drove a bunch of mustangs to Stockton and decided to have a look-see at the Sierra country before we went back to Kansas."

Soon they saw the yard of the low-lying, comfortable ranchhouse, built of pine logs cut from the mountain slopes. There were the necessary outbuildings, and corrals in which Vale's mustangs ran. A Chinese cook in white stood in the doorway. He had been watching them come in. He was an old fellow and gave his employer a toothless grin.

"You no eat chow if you catchee bullet, Boss," he jested. "Dead man can't chew good, *sabe?*"

"That's right, Chin. Shorty's hurt. You take care of him."

When the wounded man was tended and placed in a bunk, with Chin Lee watching over him, the Rio Kid said to Vale:

"We were comin' here to ask a favor. The stage was held up in the gap above by Black Bart, the road-agent. Hosses run away, and they need some others to draw the stage to Stirlin' station."

"Of course," said Vale. "I'll be glad to give a hand."

He had wagon-broken horses, and shortly were soon on their way with four strong blacks. Vale went along, and they hurried to where the stranded stage stood in the mountain gap. Kedwin met them, a hundred yards out.

"It's about time," he fumed. "Did I hear shooting down there?"

"Yuh shore did, mister," Vale said coolly, eyeing the fancy clothing of the heavy man. "A bunch of rustlers tried to run off some of my beefs, but this gent and his friends come along in the nick. Ain't you the hombre who was diggin' up in the north hills above my place a while back?"

"Yes, yes," Kedwin said shortly. "I have a claim there."

"Yuh better keep an eye peeled for that Zaldini sidewinder, Vale," warned Earp. "He's liable to come back for more."

Kedwin scowled. "Zaldini? Who's that?"

"Looked like the boss of the rustlers," an-

swered the Rio Kid. "But let's hitch up these plugs. The lady and her dad must be all-fired bored by this time!"

He grinned at Marty, and they moved to the stage.

Edith Thorpe was looking from the window. She had been sitting inside, out of the raw wind, as they waited for the Rio Kid. Vale stopped his bronc, and stared as though he had never seen a girl before.

"Why," he thought, "she's the purtiest thing I ever hope to meet!"

Looking into her eyes it was moments before the young rancher realized how openly his admiration must show, and he grew flustered, wondering if the others noticed.

"I'll give a hand," he muttered, getting down

CELESTINO MIRELES

to help Marty and the Rio Kid hitch up the horses.

He brushed close to Bob Pryor as he was fastening a trace. He had brought harness and reins, for the runaways had gone off with some.

"Who's the young lady?" he whispered. "Will yuh introduce me, Rio Kid?"

Pryor nodded. When they finished hooking up the Square V animals, he led Johnny Vale to the stage-coach door.

"This is Johnny Vale, Miss Edith—and Colonel Thorpe, Miss Edith's father, Vale."

"Happy to meet you, suh," Colonel Thorpe said heartily. "Your ranch is not many miles from here, I take it. Perhaps we'll see more of you. We may be neighbors, in fact."

Vale was shaking the colonel's hand, and then he took Edith's, held to him in greeting. She smiled at him, and life suddenly took on a bright hue and the world quickened for Johnny Vale.

"How do you do," she said. The words were commonplace, but her soft voice, the pretty Georgia accent, transformed them magically until they were music to the young rancher's ears.

"We're on our way to Major Kedwin's claim, Vale," explained Thorpe, "to investigate it,"

"I see. Yuh're gold prospectin', then?"

"We'd better get on," broke in Kedwin impatiently.

VALE didn't like Kedwin. He had met the burly man and Smoky Lownes two or three times, earlier in the season. They had come to the ranch to buy food once. But then, he didn't like any gold-hunters—except Miss Thorpe, of course.

"You don't seem enthusiastic about gold minin', suh," said Edith. She had been watching Vale's face.

"No, ma'am. I ain't. In my opinion it ruins a good country. All miners want is to rip up the ground, get the gold, and go back where they come from. They do a lot of damage, and as a rule they're a tough lot—not like you, of course, Colonel."

"Thank you, suh. I'm glad of that."

"My dad was a Forty-niner," went on Vale. "Got killed in the rush for gold to California."

He was not usually so talkative, but he kept on now. He was not speaking directly to the girl but it was for her that he was explaining.

"Suppose we hear your life history some other time?" said Kedwin. "I'm hungry and tired. I'm afraid it'll be too late to visit the mine today, Colonel Thorpe. We'll make it in the morning."

The passengers got in. Marty was on his box, and he snapped his whip. The stage rolled toward Stirling, the next station.

"We'll fetch yore hosses back, Vale," said the Rio Kid.

"I reckon I'll ride on into town with yuh," said Vale. Then he grinned. "Not that I don't trust yuh, but I'd kind of like the ride, and it ain't far."

The four young men rode after the creaking vehicle, its brake set as it descended the steep road from the gap.

Vale watched the debonair Rio Kid from the corner of his eye. He admired Bob Pryor, and wished he could acquire such an air as the Rio Kid carried.

"So yuh met up with this Kedwin before?" said the Rio Kid, as they rode along.

Vale nodded. "Yeah. He was diggin' up in the hills over my range."

"Did he have any luck?"

Vale shrugged. "Yuh never can tell. Miners don't tell about their strikes till they've sewed 'em up. I reckon Kedwin owns a claim there."

"He's tryin' to sell it to Thorpe, I figger," said Pryor. "Somehow, I don't just like that Kedwin jigger."

"Me, either. But then, I don't like prospectors nohow."

"I'd hate to see Thorpe get cold-decked.

Mebbe the boys and me'll hang around and watch."

"Yuh're mighty welcome at the Square V any time, Rio Kid," Vale said cordially, although he was fully aware that if he made such plans as were now in his mind for seeing more of Edith Thorpe that a man like the Rio Kid would be a rival to be reckoned with. His heart sank, but his admiration for Bob Pryor was not lessened.

The stage rolled at full-tilt into Stirling Station, a log building in the settlement's center. The agent and a small crowd were waiting for the late express.

"Black Bart done held us up!" Marty bellowed. "The box was stole!"

Excitement seized the waiting crowd and spread quickly through the town.

"Let's have a drink," suggested the Rio Kid to his saddle companions, after they had seen Colonel Thorpe and his daughter to the small hotel.

Vale went along. They spent a pleasant hour or so together, and it was dark when Johnny Vale pulled out of Stirling, leading his horses back to the Square V. The placid routine of his life had been thrown out of kilter that day. His mind was filled with all that had happened, but the most important event had been meeting Edith Thorpe.

"I'm goin' to win her if I can," he told himself. "That Rio Kid may give me a race. May the better man win!"

CHAPTER IV

Gold Mine

COLONEL THORPE'S face was flushed with excitement. With his sleeves rolled up he had panned out several big scoops of dirt from Kedwin's hillside claim.

"Gold!" he shouted elatedly. "Look, Rio Kid! A nugget as big as the tip of my finger!"

Pryor glanced up. The dull sheen of the magic metal caught the noon sunlight. He had ridden out with Thorpe, Kedwin and Lownes, and naturally Wyatt Earp and Mireles had tagged along.

"I got several good-sized chunks here in my pan, Colonel," the Rio Kid said. "It looks good."

Kedwin sat nearby, on a flat rock, smoking a cigar. The site of the claim was near the river, where it issued from the high mountains. The stream flowed swiftly here, not yet spread out in the lower range where Johnny Vale's ranch was situated. A high red bluff, undercut by rain and the tools of the prospectors, blocked off the eastern approach. They had left their horses and come the last quarter of a mile afoot, over a steep trail to the north of the staked claim.

Kedwin had handed Thorpe a short-handled pick and shovel, a couple of flat pans, placer mining equipment.

"Go to it, Colonel, and see for yourself," he had said.

Smoke Lownes, Kedwin's taciturn companion, strolled off up the bank of the stream, and Kedwin sat down to wait while the Rio Kid and Thorpe washed out several pans of gravel and dirt. Earp and Mireles had poked around a bit in the gravel, but Earp had remarked he was not much interested in digging for gold in somebody else's mine.

Thorpe and the Rio Kid had almost immediately found colors and bits of gold. The shaft ran, slanting down, for about fifty feet into the bluff, where it terminated in a clay wall from which jagged rocks stuck.

"How come yuh don't develop this gold mine yoreself, Kedwin?" asked the Rio Kid.

He didn't care whether he offended the burly man or not. He had an inner warning against Kedwin, and wished to make sure that Thorpe was not being cheated. But now he was almost convinced it was a real mine, and a promising one. Kedwin had not told them where to dig but had left it to them.

Kedwin apparently had accepted the Rio Kid as Thorpe's unofficial adviser.

"I've already explained to the colonel that I have to get capital quickly for a bigger venture," he answered carefully. "That's the only reason I'm willing to sell this mine. Of course, you never can guarantee what a gold mine will do in the end. The veins might peter out." He shrugged.

Thorpe was enthusiastic. "I reckon I've seen enough, suh. I'll hustle back to my friends and recommend this to them as a splendid proposition!"

He washed his hands in the river, donned his coat, and the party started to climb the bluff trail, back to the horses.

The Rio Kid tagged behind, glancing back over his shoulder at the claim. He was not satisfied. Not only had he had that instinctive warning, but the old wound over his ribs, where he had been hurt during the Civil War, itched frantically—a sure sign something was amiss. Suddenly he turned and went back around the end of the bluff.

Finding a rusty crowbar on the rocks near the mine mouth, he picked it up and hurried into the shaft. There was a turn, and the daylight was blocked off, but he had a candle stub, which he lighted, and when he reached the clay wall at the bottom he set the flickering candle on the ground and turned to the wall.

He hit the clay wall. It did not move but he thought that it gave off a rather hollow sound. Again he drove the crowbar into the wall, putting all his force into it. He made several more tries before he fell forward with the bar as it

went through. A cool draft hit him, and even by the weak candlelight he saw that a strong partition had been built here. Ahead loomed a much larger shaft, running on into the hill.

"Mighty neat," he muttered. "This claim's been worked out! Kedwin hid it, made it look like a new one!"

His wound itched maddeningly. He scratched at it through his sweated shirt, excited by what he had discovered.

At a slight sound he whirled, reaching for a Colt. But he froze as he saw the glint of the shotgun muzzles covering him. He was against the candle-light.

"Clever, ain't you?" a mocking voice said.

"All right, Kedwin," the Rio Kid said coolly. "Yuh can't kill me and get away with it. Yuh built up this mine, but it's run out. I'll have to tell Thorpe."

"Thorpe's not likely to worry about you any longer."

The Rio Kid, expert in gunfights, knew that Kedwin was going to shoot. The man was in a hurry, for one thing; perhaps he had started Lownes off with Thorpe, but Earp and Mireles would be back for the Rio Kid.

He did the best he could, in the constricted passage, and against the light. He threw himself sideward and down, flinging his lithe body to one side, even as the shotgun belched death.

The tearing buckshot caught him. The world blazed with light as his shocked, stunned brain registered the pain. A confused roaring was in his ears. He could no longer see, as the blackness struck, but he had a dim impression of more gunshots. . . .

WHEN the Rio Kid regained consciousness, Johnny Vale stood over him.

"How'd I get *here* so quick, Vale?" he asked.

"Quick?" Vale laughed. "Why, it's three days since yore pards toted yuh in and we put yuh to bed, Rio Kid. Yuh've been out of yore head. Lie still.

Someone bounded through the open door, seized the Rio Kid's hand.

"My General! You feel better, *si?*" It was his loyal friend, Celestino.

Bob Pryor had been wounded before, during the Civil War and while riding the wild Frontier. He knew the reason for the lassitude which clutched at his being. It came from shock and loss of blood. There was a bandage at the side of his head and his left ribs, bulky with another dressing, also ached.

Wyatt Earp, hearing Pryor's voice as he answered Celestino, came from the porch. His tall figure slouched in the low doorway of the room where the Rio Kid lay.

"Feelin' better?" he inquired.

"Yeah, Wyatt, reckon I am. What in blazes happened after I went out?"

"Well, Thorpe and Smoky Lownes got to the hosses, with us close behind. When you didn't show, me'n Celestino started back to hunt yuh. We thought we heard a shotgun and

The Rio Kid flung himself down as the tearing buckshot caught him (CHAPTER IV)

I sang out. Kedwin come out of the mine. He said there'd been an accident and that we better hustle and help yuh. Mireles run in, but I was leery. I stuck near the exit, and Kedwin run off, after Thorpe. As I stepped out, I seen a bunch of gunnies—they looked like them Zaldini rustlers—jump up on the other side of the river and head over toward me. I managed to hold 'em till Celestino got yuh out."

"Kedwin shot me," said the Rio Kid. "I reckon he was in a hurry. He thought I was dead, I s'pose."

The Rio Kid closed his eyes, then opened them again. There was something queer about it all. They were hiding something from him, he decided.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"There's a Wells-Fargo detective hangin' 'round here, waitin' to speak to you," answered Johnny Vale.

"We told him he was loco but he wants to speak to yuh just the same," explained Earp.

"Wells-Fargo? What they want with me?"

Earp cleared his throat. "Kedwin and Lownes, along with Thorpe, found a flour sack like Black Bart wears hid in yore saddle-bag, Rio Kid. Kedwin claimed you must be the road-agent!"

He laughed and the Rio Kid laughed with him.

"Show him in," he ordered. The charge was utterly absurd, but only the Rio Kid and his friends were sure of that.

After a few minutes, a tall, wiry man in a dark suit and muddied boots came into the room. He had high cheekbones, and wore no beard. His eyes were alert, quick. He stopped, looking down at the Rio Kid.

"Good afternoon. I'm J. B. Hume, of Wells-Fargo. Are you strong enough to talk to me?"

"Yeah, go to it, Hume. But I'm warnin' you, you're barkin' up a wrong tree."

"I've barked up a good many since I started on Black Bart's trail, sir," Hume said quietly.

He pulled up a chair, and began to question Pryor.

"How do you account for the mask being in your saddle-bag?"

"Somebody put it there, and it wasn't for a joke," replied the Rio Kid. He was certain that Lownes or Kedwin had planted the Black Bart mask in his bag.

"Of course, your two friends here have given you a perfect alibi, clearing you," said Hume. "But I can't let any slight clue slip. I must catch Black Bart."

"You will, if you keep goin', Hume. But I ain't Black Bart and I'm just as glad, with you on the trail."

Someone sang out in the yard, and Johnny Vale left to answer the call. The Rio Kid, after Hume finished talking to him, felt exhausted. Adroitly, the detective had pumped him dry.

"Will yuh do me a favor, Hume?" he asked.

"Yes, if it's within my power."

"Try to find Colonel Timothy Thorpe. He come to Stirlin' with an hombre named Fred Kedwin, who was sellin' him a gold mine near here. If yuh can trace Thorpe in time, tell him I said not to buy the mine, that it's a salted job."

"I will."

As Hume rose, Vale returned, leading a genteel, slender fellow who smiled as he looked at the Rio Kid with deep-set eyes. He had graying brown hair, a heavy mustache, and he limped a bit.

His clothing was plain and clean, and his large head gave him an intelligent, scholarly appearance.

"Meet Perfessor Charles Bolton, boys," said Vale. "He's a friend of mine." To Hume, the rancher said. "Why not stay and eat with us, mister? We'd be plumb glad to have yuh."

"No, thanks. I've got to run along. Thanks for your help."

The restless searcher after Black Bart, the Terror of the Sierras, nodded and hurried away.

The Rio Kid needed sleep and strength-giving food, so with plenty of them both—Chin Lee fixed him strong, hot broth—he felt better next morning. Professor Bolton brought him more broth on a tray, and sat with him while he ate.

Pryor enjoyed Bolton's company. Educated and well-informed, Bolton interested the Rio Kid with his conversation.

IN THE next few days, Bolton spent a good deal of time with the invalid. Earp was out, riding the range with Vale, and Celestino had to keep Saber and his own horse in trim. Then, too, the Mexican did his part around the ranch to earn his keep.

Bolton had a game leg and confesed he was not much of a rider.

"It's mighty peaceful here at the Square V," he remarked, with his kind smile. "I was here before and it did me a world of good, so I came back for more."

He had a leather-bound volume of Shakespeare, well-thumbed, and he read from it to the Rio Kid, entertaining him while he lay injured.

One evening, when Bob Pryor's wounds were about healed, and his strength was returning, he and Bolton sat in the dying sunlight, on Vale's front porch. Johnny Vale came galloping up and dismounted.

"She's back, Rio Kid!" he sang out.

"Edith?"

"Yeah. The colonel and a passel of his pards have set up camp at Kedwin's mine."

"Then Kedwin sold his bill of goods!" groaned the Rio Kid. "He brought it off before Hume could trace Thorpe and give him my message!"

There seemed little he could do about it all now. But he must do something. The Rio Kid decided that he must see Thorpe as soon as

possible, and did pay the colonel a visit the next day.

The gray smoke twirled slowly up from the Rio Kid's cigarette as he walked into the camp.

Busy men were digging in the bluff, and a windlass was being set up. Boxes and bales lay about, and on the river's edge stood half a dozen brown canvas tents, the homes of Thorpe's friends who had returned here with him.

Celestino Mireles had accompanied the Rio Kid to the camp, but Wyatt Earp was out hunting in the mountains again. He was a restless fellow, always on the move. Earp was a manhunter by instinct, and while he had announced that he was going after bear and venison, the Rio Kid was sure that Earp was seeking clues that might lead him to Black Bart.

Big rewards were posted for the mysterious road-agent's capture.

The aristocratic Colonel Thorpe, bulky in corduroy and miner's boots, hurried toward the Rio Kid. He looked Pryor in the eye and held out his hand.

"Suh," he said, "I owe you an apology! When last we met, I was given the impression you might be the road-agent, Black Bart! Major Kedwin's friend,, Lownes, found a flour sack pierced with eye-holes in your baggage, suh. I don't understand it altogether, but young Vale says it was a mistake, and he completely set our minds at rest."

The Rio Kid smiled and shook hands with the colonel. Over by the tents he observed several women, wives and daughters of the hopeful miners who had come to share the hardships of their men and care for them. Among them was Edith Thorpe and the sight of her set Pryor's heart to pounding.

"Did yuh get the message I sent you by Detective Hume, Colonel?" asked the Rio Kid.

"Message? No, suh. Of course, I haven't been still for long. Soon as Kedwin and I reached Sacramento, I gathered my friends together and we purchased the Thorpe's Hope—that's what the boys were kind enough to name the mine. We hope to make our fortunes here. All of us have invested heavily—everything that we could scrape up. Of course, we pray that Fate will be kind to us in our search."

He paused, beaming. His voice held the hope of which he spoke, and honesty shone from his eyes.

No one could ever believe that Colonel Thorpe would even vary an inch from the path of rectitude.

"Yuh never can tell about gold mines, Colonel," said the Rio Kid. He was uneasy, finding almost impossible his task of telling them they had bought a salted proposition.

"That's true," said the colonel. "It's always a gamble. Still, we'll hope for the best. But come along, I want you to know my friends."

CHAPTER V

Gold Miners

HEARTILY, Colonel Thorpe took the Rio Kid by the arm and led him to the workers nearby. Pryor walked with leaden feet, as his duty became more and more difficult. Johnny Vale had been there twice, since the prospectors had set up camp, but he had frankly informed the Rio Kid he hadn't the heart to disillusion them.

"This is the Rio Kid, boys," said Thorpe, smiling as he introduced his friends. "Jeb Anson, on the left there. His wife and lad are with him."

Anson shook hands. He was a big man, a few years younger than Thorpe. He had crisp black hair, a square, strong face and strong hands. In his rough outdoors clothing his size was accentuated.

"Happy to have the pleasure, suh!" said Anson.

"Then here is Rob Murray, my closest friend," said the colonel. "We fought under General Forrest together."

Murray was a lean man whose hair was graying at the temples, and had a severe, strong mouth. He looked to be a fine man.

Thorpe went on around the circle.

"George Donovan—Larry Tate—Vern Wilson."

They were all Southerners, uprooted by the Civil War. They had lost much, and had been urged by pride and desire to recover themselves in a shattered world, to taking what they had managed to save and coming to the new land of California.

The Rio Kid knew the type—men as fine and strong as their women were cultured and beautiful—and also strong.

"Gents," said Pryor, "I'm happy to know yuh all. And I shore wish yuh the best of luck. But did any of yuh notice that the shaft inside runs on a good ways into the bluff? Colonel, it was walled up when yuh looked her over."

"Yes, I noticed that," said Thorpe, still pleased. "It looks as though there'd been more work done here than I believed at first."

"It'll save some diggin'," observed Jeb Anson. "We've had luck already, Rio Kid. This mornin' we panned out three hundred in flakes and small grains of gold."

They were still working in the front of the shaft. And, the Rio Kid saw, they were greenhorns at prospecting. But then, so were ninety per cent of the men who searched for placer gold, when they began.

"Yuh better not pin yore hopes too high, boys," said Pryor. "That old shaft that was

covered up, Colonel, when Kedwin showed yuh the mine, means it's been worked out." He paused, trying to tell them they had been cheated.

"Gold's where you find it," said Murray. "It's mighty fine to know you, Rio Kid. Excuse us if we get to our work."

They were turning away, eagerly, to the picks, shovels and shallow pans when Pryor spoke again.

"Kedwin's a crook—" he began.

"What's that?" said Thorpe, the smile leaving his face.

"Lemme talk to yuh, Colonel, private-like."

Thorpe went with him. The rest were going back to work.

"I got to tell yuh, Colonel," blurted the Rio Kid, "that yore mine's salted. Kedwin hooked yuh."

Thorpe's face turned red. "How can you say that, suh? We've already panned out over a thousand dollars in gold."

"Kedwin planted it there for yuh in the walls of the short shaft. Prob'ly fired it from a shotgun into the gravel and clay. Mebbe he used up four or five thousand in dust and small grains or nuggets. That way yuh could pan, shallow, of course, anywhere in the shaft that yuh seen, and hit gold."

Thorpe's bearded lips were open. He grew redder and redder and his fists clenched. But he managed to keep his voice down.

"Suh, I know you mean well. But if what you say is true, then I have done an awful thing. It was I who sold this mine to my friends. They've put all they had into buying it and into tools, equipment and provisions. I can only hope you are mistaken in your assumption, for if you aren't, then my friends are paupers, and thanks to me."

"Don't take it so hard, Colonel. You ain't the first man who got taken in on a salted proposition."

The Rio Kid had to drop his gaze from the colonel's eyes. There was agony in them, torture. But the soldier in Thorpe held an iron control over his erect body.

"I will ask you please not to repeat what you have said to me just now, Rio Kid," said Thorpe, with quiet dignity. "If it is true—which I can only hope it isn't, and that you are making an honest mistake—we must find it out for ourselves. No offense meant, suh."

He held out his hand. It was shaking a little.

PRYOR was distressed, desperately sorry for the man. Thorpe took all responsibility on himself. He had borne up under many hard shocks, the death of his son and his wife, the war. But now he felt that his honor was involved.

"I'm ready to help yuh, Colonel, any way I can," said the Rio Kid. "Yuh don't happen to savvy where that Kedwin snake is now, do yuh?"

Thorpe shook his head. "I left him in Sacramento, after we had paid him and taken the deed to the mine."

"Ain't nothin' to be done legal-like," drawled the Rio Kid, "but if I meet up with him before he spends all yore money, I might salvage somethin'."

Thorpe stared at him, his face grave, set with deep lines that showed the inner emotions he fought to conceal.

"Kedwin had me fooled, at first, Colonel," the Rio Kid said. "'Twasn't till I went back and cut through into the old shaft that I savvied he'd salted the mine. I tried to get to yuh but he was on me with a shotgun and downed me. It was days before I could talk and then I tried to send word to warn you, but it was too late. I feel partly responsible. I didn't cotton to Kedwin and that's why I tagged along when yuh come to see the claim, hopin' to see yuh wouldn't be hornswoggled."

"It isn't your fault, Rio Kid. The blame is entirely on my head, suh. That is, if it turns out as you say." Thorpe nodded and turned away, his body tense.

"He believes what I said, but he just can't admit it yet," Pryor thought compassionately.

His anger against Fred Kedwin increased, burning hot within him. Kedwin had wounded him, tried to kill him, but the Rio Kid counted that as nothing to what the man had done to Thorpe and the people with the colonel.

When the Rio Kid strolled over to the tents Edith Thorpe came to greet him, smiling, taking the hand he extended.

"I'm happy to see you again, Rio Kid!" she exclaimed. "Johnny said you were staying at his ranch, and that you'd been laid up."

"Yes'm. A sidewinder got me with a couple of buckshot. But yuh can't kill a man as full of deviltry as me." He grinned and the girl laughed with him.

"I've got some things to wash out in the creek," she said. "Will you come and talk to me while I work?"

"I'll help yuh," he said promptly. "In the Army I learned to be a good washerwoman."

They went to the stream together, below the camp, and in the clear flowing water cleansed the linens and other garments. Edith asked him about Johnny Vale, about the Square V. She seemed interested in Vale.

"Doggone, I wish she'd ask me more about myself," thought the Rio Kid.

He left her after the noon meal. As he took his leave, he said, looking into her eyes:

"Take care of yore dad, Miss Edith."

"What do you mean, Rio Kid?" she asked, a little startled. "I always take care of him as best I can."

"Well, watch over him. Good luck. I'll be seein' yuh soon."

"It was good of you to come," she said. "Tell Johnny, Father was speaking of buying some beef from him if he can spare it. And tell him I asked for him."

"Yes'm."

The Rio Kid picked up Celestino and they walked to their horses, on higher ground beyond the bluff. Pryor was in a gloomy state of mind. Now that he had seen the hope and enthusiasm of the people who had been cheated, he was hurt to the core.

The men at the Square V had missed the Rio Kid at dinner time, for he had been working up a healthy appetite, and Chin Lee served delicious meals. Professor Charles Bolton, the Rio Kid, Johnny Vale and Celestino, with Vale's handful of punchers, did full justice to them in a long shed adjoining the kitchen. Shorty, who had been nicked in the fight with Zaldini's rustlers, was one of them now also, for he had recovered from his injury and was back in the saddle.

Vale, coming in late from the range, found the Rio Kid smoking in the yard.

"Did yuh tell 'em?" asked Vale.

"Tried to," Pryor said soberly. "I told the colonel. He's tryin' not to believe it. Edith was askin' after yuh, Johnny. She says them miners want to buy beef from yuh."

Johnny Vale regarded his friend, the Rio Kid, looking straight into his blue eyes.

"Mebbe yuh already know it," he said, "but I aim to marry Edith if she'll have me."

The Rio Kid held out his hand. "Me, too, Johnny. But we're friends just the same."

Vale sighed deeply, with relief. "I was hopin' yuh'd see it thataway. Yuh're shore a man, Rio Kid. I hope yuh'll think the same of me. I didn't want to get the jump on yuh so I stayed away for a day or two, till you seen her again. I'll let 'em have beef. . . . Say, I run onto some tracks today—rustlers, I believe. Prob'ly Zaldini's same bunch that's been annoyin' me. They were drivin' a dozen cows ahead, but the sign was two days old."

"Come get it!" Chin Lee was ringing his big iron bell, hung at the kitchen door.

THEY went in to supper, and soon after everyone turned in.

Next morning, the Chinese cook was up first of all, as usual. He always rose at the crack of dawn. He was waiting for Johnny Vale, when his boss came into the kitchen for breakfast.

"Creek no good any more, Boss," remarked Chin Lee. "Too much mud. Stop pipe. I boil. Coffee taste like mud."

"What yuh mean, Chin?" demanded young Vale.

The Chinese shrugged. He waved a skinny arm toward the river, flowing from the hills. It was Vale's water supply, for his cattle and horses, for the house.

Vale went outside, and the Rio Kid, rolling a quirly, joined him as they moved toward the river.

"Look at that!" exclaimed Pryor. "It's as brown as the Mississippi!"

"Why, it's risen a foot overnight!" cried Vale. He was puzzled, worried. The river was vital to the Square V. Then he swore. "Shucks, it's them fool miners up above, Rio Kid! They must have dumped the whole cliff into the stream."

"They work mighty fast, then," answered Pryor. "They'd hardly set up any of their machinery yesterday, Johnny."

"Well, I'm goin' up and see about it. They'll have to be more careful about dumpin' their leavin's. A couple feet more and half the valley'll flood."

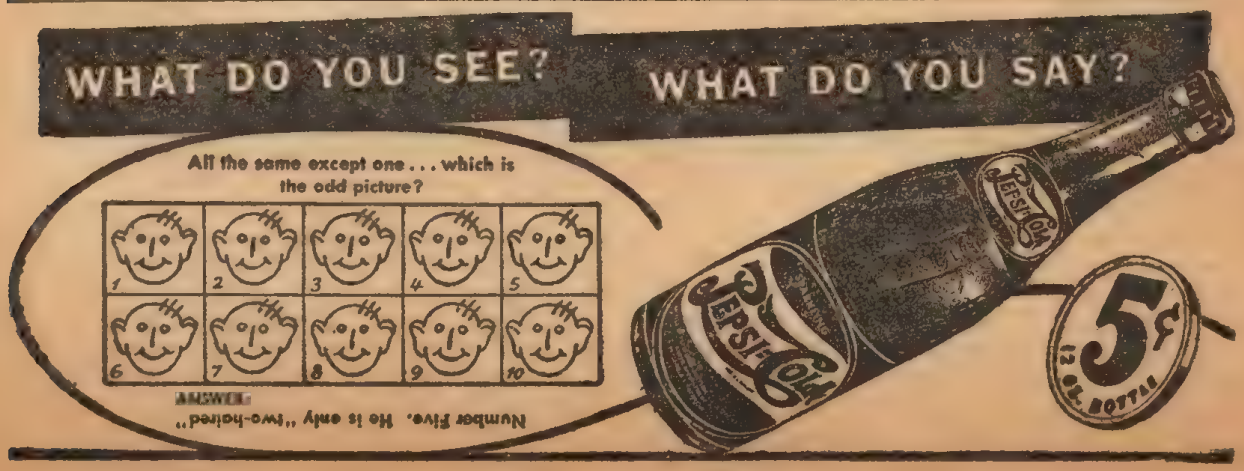
Snatching breakfast, they saddled up. Vale, the Rio Kid, Mireles, and Wyatt Earp started toward the Thorpe camp upstream. Bolton, who got up later than the early-rising ranchers, was still in his room.

The sun was bright when they left their horses and walked toward the bluff, which dropped sharply to the river bed. Beyond it stood the new camp. Reaching the rise, they could look down and see that the yellow water of the once clear stream had spread over the low area near its bank, flooding the tents of the miners.

"There they are, near the mine," said Pryor.

The men and women who had come to the Sierras with Colonel Thorpe huddled on a higher strip of ground at the base of the bluff. All their belongings were wet.

Jeb Anson and Rob Murray answered their questions. Colonel Thorpe was not in sight. Johnny Vale stepped close to Edith, spoke to her in low tones. [*Turn page*]



"The river rose durin' the night," explained Anson. "We had to get out in the dark."

"Must have been a cloudburst in the mountains," opined Murray.

"Where's Colonel Thorpe?" inquired the Rio Kid.

"He rode off upriver, to see if he could find out what was wrong," explained Murray. "He left early."

It was obvious that these people were not responsible for the fouling and sharp rise of the river. There was no cessation of the flow, and the Rio Kid and Vale thought it even higher than when they had observed it below.

"Let's go," said Johnny Vale. He was disturbed over the threat to his range and chief water supply. "We'll foller the colonel and find what's causin' it. I don't believe there were any big storms in the mountains."

Picking up their horses, the quartet headed for the hills. They kept on a ridge roughly parallel to the river. The deer trail made hard going in spots but they pushed on and on, gaining altitude.

"Look!" said the Rio Kid, pointing to the sky off to the right of their position.

Black shapes floated majestically in the blue California sky.

"Vultures!" exclaimed Vale.

Their attention drawn, they watched, and presently Wyatt Earp remarked:

"There's a hoss standin' down there, boys."

Johnny Vale turned his mustang down a shale slide.

"That's Colonel Thorpe's gray geldin', fellers," he said. "We'll find him near, I reckon."

Vale was right. Colonel Timothy Thorpe, C. S. A., was sitting propped with his back to a boulder. The gelding was cropping at the leaves of a greening bush, his reins dropped. The Rio Kid threw himself off Saber. He could see the reddish hole, from temple to temple, in the colonel's handsome head. A big Colt .45, Thorpe's own revolver, lay at the man's side, the long fingers relaxed about the stock.

"Dead, boys!" growled Bob Pryor.

CHAPTER VI

Hydraulics

FOUR men stood staring at the dead. Johnny Vale gulped, his tanned face paling. He was thinking of Edith Thorpe, of how she would feel when she knew her father was gone. The Rio Kid felt sick at the pit of his stomach. He had jumped to the conclusion that Thorpe, unable to face the music, must have killed himself in the shame of the discovery that he had ruined his friends.

"Mebbe I shouldn't have told him," he muttered, the sweat coming out on his brow. "It might have been better if he'd found it out, slowlike, for himself."

"General," said Celestino softly, plucking at his friend's sleeve, "zere are man-ee men up zere, above."

The river had cut a gorge through the mountains in which it rose. Ahead loomed a massive, spruce-covered slope, towering into the sky, and flanked on three sides by broken peaks and pinnacles of red rock. Mireles had moved off, and the Rio Kid joined him, looking up at the mountainside. Smoke issued from several fires up there.

"It's a big camp," said the Rio Kid. "Vale, what yuh think about it?"

Johnny Vale and Wyatt Earp joined them and regarded the scene on the mountain. They couldn't make out any details at such a distance, even in the clear, crisp air of the hills, but the expert Rio Kid didn't need to, nor did Vale.

"That's where the silt's comin' from," growled Vale at last, "or I'll eat my hat without mustard."

Bob Pryor nodded. "Hydraulickin'," he said. "I've seen it before."

"Me, too." Vale nodded, his jaw set and his eyes hardening. "It can wreck a river and its valley quicker'n anything. An earthquake's easier on land than that!" He was in a cold sweat, for his property was threatened and he knew it only too well. "Cuss miners!" he snarled. "They ruin a country! Always disturbin' the ground, makin' messes other folks has to clean up. I'm almost glad them folks ain't hit gold close to me as they are—if it wasn't for Edith and her dad."

The Rio Kid looked grave. "Yuh're a mighty fine man, Johnny. I'd ride the river with yuh any day. But them folks are the salt of the earth. They've been cheated of all they had. Now what are they goin' to do? That hole in the ground Kedwin sold 'em is playing out, if it was ever much account. Thorpe's dead because of it. How many more'll go under we can't say. They spent everything buyin' a salted claim and equipment to work it with. Some of 'em got kids waitin' back in Sacramento. Others are gettin' along where it ain't easy to start fresh on nothin' but hope and a pair of suspenders."

Vale bit his lip. "What yuh say makes sense, Rio Kid. I never wished 'em anything but good luck, and I mean to give 'em a hand when they need it. But if them hydraulickers keep goin' for long, I'll need help myself. Come on! Thorpe's dead. We'll leave him till we come back."

They returned to the ridge trail. The Rio Kid and Wyatt Earp kept their eyes on the winding, rocky path. Hoofs had passed along here recently, as overturned stones and bits of other sign attested.

A mile from where they had found Colonel

Thorpe's body, they dipped down into a cut and, crossing a small feeder brook which joined the main river on the east of their position, a patch of softer ground caught the Rio Kid's eye. He glanced at Wyatt Earp, to see if his manhunting friend had noticed the same thing that he had.

Earp nodded, then shrugged, turning his face toward the mountain. Earp's tawny mustache bristled and his sky-blue eyes were like twin marbles.

They were nearer, now, to the bustling activity above. They could hear the echoing of the river, rushing through the gorge, a frantic sound as of a giant thing seeking escape. No longer was the water clean and silver, but it had turned a yellow hue, and stones, mud and dead limbs of trees rolled in its bed.

But the four riders were pushing their horses up a beaten road. Pines and cedars, clumps of bush broke the rocky ground. Wagons had come up here, rutted the softer spots, the iron tires knocking stones aside, scarring them, pulverizing the shale.

They could see men scurrying about, and some brown tents set on a flat above. As they approached, three shots banged from just ahead, although they heard no whistling bullets close to them.

"Warnin' we're comin'," remarked Bob Pryor.

His quick eyes found the sentinel who had discharged a revolver into the air. The man was on a high point to their left, screened by some rocks.

THEY kept on. Some of the activity ceased, however, and men hurriedly moved into a position from which they could guard the camp and workings. Strung out with space between them to allow for flying bullets, the four riders moved up.

A spur which had cut off their view of the main workings came to an abrupt end. They could now see miners, holding four big hoses, which sent jets of ripping power against a high cliff close to the river's gorge. The force was tremendous, fed from above.

At the impact of the confined jets earth, boulders, gravel, washed from the cliff. Undercut sections crumbled and joined the rush. A thousand rivulets ran off, carrying more dirt and smaller pebbles along. The spill flowed over into the river bed on a wide front.

The Rio Kid knew what hydraulic mining meant. In a startlingly short period of time it could wash away a whole mountainside and do more damage than a hundred storms. Concentrated in such a way, the water was a wild, murderous thing, destroying the land. A river bed could rise in a short time just from the settling of the mud and débris carried down. The rise meant that valleys below would be flooded, ruined.

"Look who's here!" exclaimed the Rio Kid.

"Kedwin!" cried Johnny Vale.

Over fifty men had lined up. Some carried guns, while others held picks and shovels or crowbars. They faced the approaching quartet, some of them grinning in anticipation of a fight, others with grim faces. Fred Kedwin stood with his booted feet spread, watching them. Smoky Lownes flanked him on one side, and on the other was a huge man in dark leather and a black Stetson.

"That big hombre looks like Zaldini, the rustler!" said the Rio Kid. "Don't he, Vale?"

"That's him. Now I savvy why he wanted so much beef! They must have sixty, seventy miners up here to feed three times a day."

Kedwin wore rough corduroys, but his thick brown hair was bare to the wind that gusted on the mountainside. At his heavy waist rode two revolvers, hanging in open holsters from the double cartridge belts, the copper cases glinting in the sunlight.

Lownes had a double-barreled shotgun in his hands, and was watching them intently, while Zaldini, with whom they had tangled before, was grinning, his big teeth showing white. Clustered near Zaldini were a number of men whose aspect was different from that of the miners. They wore leather and carried their guns in a professional manner. They were members of Zaldini's gang, while the rest were evidently hired workers brought in by Kedwin.

The Rio Kid pulled up within hailing distance, as the other three riders lined out near him.

"Well?" Kedwin sang out in his gruff, harsh voice. "What do you want?"

"Kedwin," answered the Rio Kid, "I see yuh're back. A bad penny always turns up, don't it?"

Kedwin tossed his head, smiling. "I was thinkin' the same thing, Rio Kid. I had an idea you were dead, but then I heard you were at Vale's. What do you want? We're busy men."

"Yuh're wreckin' my range, Kedwin, with that hydraulickin'," shouted Johnny Vale, his face flaming with anger. "I ain't goin' to stand for it!"

"What do you intend to do about it?" Kedwin said coolly. "I've staked my claims legally, and I'm washing out my gold. The law doesn't say I can't use hydraulic methods."

"That's true enough," muttered Earp. "But they ought to quit it. It shore ruins a place."

"I'll stop yuh myself!" shouted the infuriated rancher, shaking his fist.

"Go to it, see if you can," answered Kedwin. He was enjoying his position.

Johnny Vale was figuring what forces he could bring to bear. He had only three or four riders of his own. He might count on the Rio Kid, Earp, Mireles, and perhaps a few more from Thorpe's camp. They would still be outnumbered four or five to one, with Kedwin in an almost impregnable defensive position and the law on the man's side.

It was not the habit of such men as the Rio Kid and Johnny Vale to call for the law.

They usually took care of themselves. Besides, the law in the wilds of northern California was a principle rather than actual enforcement. Posses now and then came through, hunting for an outlaw such as Black Bart, but local justice as a rule was a matter for the individuals concerned to settle.

VALE was almost bursting with rage. Again he shook his fist.

"You polecat," he yelled. "I'll skin yuh alive and nail yore hide to my corral fence for this! I'll—"

"Take it easy, Johnny," said the Rio Kid softly. "Don't give him the pleasure of seein' how riled yuh are. It plumb pleases the sidewinder too much."

Vale pulled in his horns.

"We might as well go home," he growled. "Come on."

They turned their horses. Grins spread over the faces of the men watching on the flat above. Someone gave a catcall, and it was taken up by the rest. Horse laughs and ribald jests followed them, and Zaldini fired his Colt over them, and others followed suit.

The Rio Kid and Earp were furious but they hid it. They kept cool brains even in the utmost danger. Bullets sang over the four as they retreated down the mountain road. One came close, ricocheted from a round stone, and zipped past the nose of Mireles' skittish mustang. The animal snorted and reared and only the Mexican's superb horsemanship held him in the saddle.

The triumphant jeers of Kedwin and his followers still rang in their ears.

"Cuss Kedwin!" fumed Johnny Vale. "Cuss his heart and soul!"

The Rio Kid glanced back over his shoulder. Zaldini, Kedwin and the fighting men under them were still lined up, but the miners were going back to the cliffs, to hunt the gold exposed by the ripping nozzles.

"That's why Kedwin wanted money pronto, so's he could develop this other mine!" said the Rio Kid. "He hooked Thorpe and his friends with that salted job and now's he's ridin' high, wide and handsome!"

They were out of pistol range now, but Earp and Pryor kept an eye on the gang above. They knew why Kedwin had not ordered his men to shoot at them while they were near. Kedwin was well aware that the Rid Kid, Wyatt Earp and their two comrades would take a dozen or more with them before they could be downed. Zaldini had felt the bite of their lead and had seen their shooting, and Kedwin and his lieutenants held them in healthy respect, so far as a gunfight went.

In gloomy silence, Johnny Vale rode with bowed head, scowling at the trail ahead of his mustang's jogging nose.

They picked up Colonel Thorpe's body, tied it to his horse, and started to the gold claim by the river.

Vale licked his lips. "Who—who's goin' to tell her?" he asked.

"I'll do it," offered Wyatt Earp. "Somebody's got to, and I savvy how you boys feel."

Mireles said nothing. He watched his friend and comrade of the trails, the Rio Kid, his black eyes slitted. He was fearful that Pryor would fall in love, marry, and desert the wild Frontier life. He would lose his partner that way.

When they came to a soft spot in the ground, the Rio Kid fell back, and his steady eyes were held by the imprints of the horse which had been Thorpe's. Earp, too, seemed interested in this. When they had crossed the stretch, Wyatt said in a low voice:

"The colonel rode *past* the spot where he was killed, didn't he? And then he was brought back to it."

"To cover the tracks on that shale where he was left," murmured Bob Pryor, nodding. "He never killed hisself, Wyatt, but I'll lay you a thousand to one I know who did do it."

"No takers," said Earp sententiously.

CHAPTER VII

New Life

THE first shock of Edith's bereavement had passed. Colonel Timothy Thorpe had been buried on the hillside near the gold claim by his friends, and Edith had been taken under the care of Rob Murray's wife, Dora. Murray assumed command of the little party of prospectors. They moved their camp to the higher ground and kept digging.

A week after the colonel's death, the Rio Kid and Johnny Vale rode up to pay a call on them, to see how Edith was. They had been there on several other occasions, not only to see the girl, but because their compassion had been aroused by the hard luck these folks had run into. As yet, Pryor and Vale had not crushed the miners' hopes by telling them that they were certain the gold claim was worthless. There was, of course, always the chance a new vein might be struck.

That afternoon showed little activity at the camp. The river, dirty and swollen because of Kedwin's hydraulicking above, was over its banks. Birds sang gaily in the greening trees, and the warmth of the spring was in the sun. But the young men found a gloomy gathering about the tents.

Edith was not in sight. Rob Murray greeted them, told them the girl had gone for a walk up the hill.

Murray led the Rio Kid and Johnny Vale to a spot where they could talk without being overheard by the rest.

LELAND STANFORD

LELAND STANFORD was born in New York State in 1824. His brothers went to the West Coast and when he followed later, they set him up. He was a stocky man who, though only five feet eleven inches in height, weighed as much as two hundred and sixty-eight pounds. He had unusual energy, was susceptible to flattery, and gave forth rather ponderous platitudes.

He was Governor of California in 1863, and helped hold the state in line for the Union. Getting into railroad construction, he controlled the Central Pacific, which connected with the Union Pacific. Southern Pacific, too, was his. He made terrific profits and his estate was estimated at nineteen million dollars.

The death of their son at the age of fifteen caused Stanford and his wife to found Leland Stanford, Jr., University in Southern, California.

Stanford himself died in 1893.

"We haven't found a trace of gold in three days, boys," he informed them. "There's none at all in the back of the shaft."

"How much yuh got?"

"About three thousand, we figure. But it won't go far among so many."

"I reckon it's about all yuh'll get, Murray," drawled the Rio Kid.

Murray was silent for a time, then he gulped.

"We were cheated, weren't we?" he said, his mouth set and his lean body tense. "The claim was salted, somehow?"

"Yes, yuh was," blurted Johnny Vale. "Fred Kedwin done it."

"I see," said Murray, his voice quiet. "When Thorpe shot himself, it made us suspicious. He—he wouldn't have done anything dishonest, Tim wouldn't. Some are pretty bitter. They blame Tim for it all. Our money's gone and we don't know where to turn. Tim talked us into buying this claim."

"Kedwin fooled him, and he fooled me, too, for a while," declared the Rio Kid. "I had to tell Thorpe. He knew yuh'd been cheated, and it hit him mighty hard."

"That's why he shot himself, then!" exclaimed Murray.

Edith Thorpe had come along, and was almost upon them as they stood engrossed in their talk. They had not heard her light step on the path, and the Rio Kid saw her standing, listening, her red lips slightly parted. Her eyes were filled with pain.

"Father was not a coward, Rob! You know that. He wasn't the kind who gives up because he's lost something. He—he was the dearest man in the world and the most honest!" She stifled her sob.

Murray was touched. "I'm sorry you heard what I said, dear," he said. "You know I loved your dad. If he made a mistake, it was an honest one."

"Father didn't kill himself," insisted Edith.

"How do yuh know that?" asked the Rio Kid.

She shook her head. "He—he just wouldn't."

"She's right, Murray," said the Rio Kid. "It took me time to find out what she savvies in her heart, knowin' her dad as she did. But Thorpe was shot by somebody, and not where we found him."

Vale and Murray were startled. The Rio Kid had kept his thoughts to himself concerning the tracks he had so carefully observed. Vale had been too perturbed at the time to notice them.

"How can yuh say that, Rio Kid?" asked the young rancher.

"First we figgered that Thorpe shot hisself because he was ashamed to face the music. But when we passed over soft ground on the way to the mountain, I saw that Thorpe's hoss had been by there goin' and comin'. On the way back, the animal was led. Thorpe was killed above, put on the hoss and run back to the shale in the hope of hidin' tracks."

"Why didn't you tell us before?" asked Murray.

The Rio Kid shrugged. "I didn't see any point in it, and I ain't caught the killer yet."

Edith touched the Rio Kid's hand. "Thank you, Rio Kid."

They walked back to camp together. At the Rio Kid's behest, Murray called the others about the little clearing, and they listened as Bob Pryor spoke.

"Folks," said the Rio Kid, "Fred Kedwin sold you a salted claim here. Prob'ly he fired a few shotgun loads of gold into the walls of the shaft, close to the surface. He had most of it blocked off, as it would have cost too much to salt it all. The time I found it out, Kedwin wounded me. Thorpe was shore it was a good mine and he persuaded you folks to put all yuh had in the mine. There's nothin' legal yuh can do. But most gold mines turn out losers, anyways."

"That's the truth," growled Johnny Vale. "Even if a man discovers a big one, they get it away from him one way or another."

"Vale and me talked it over, and we decided that when yuh'd had enough of this, he'd make yuh a proposition," went on Pryor. "Go to it, Johnny."

"It's like this, and the Rio Kid thought it up," explained Vale. "There's good range above me, on the north, that I ain't usin'. Each family can stake a section or whatever he's able to, and yuh can get a start ranchin'. Yuh can grow stuff and I'll help yuh set up. It ain't easy, but there's good huntin' in the mountains and with what yuh raise, yuh can skin by till yore herds build up."

NEW hope sprang into worried faces as they heard the Rio Kid's idea and Johnny Vale's generous offer.

Rob Murray looked around at his friends.

"It sounds good to me, Johnny, and we're mightly grateful."

There was nothing to hold them there. Vale and the Rio Kid helped them strike their tents, and the animals were driven in from a nearby pasture, saddled or hitched to the few wagons they had. By dark, they were all at Vale's ranch, weary, hungry. Chin Lee blinked and rolled up his sleeves, to prepare food for the large number of guests.

In the next days, the Rio Kid and his friends were busy assisting Murray's party in locating sections in the low-domed hills north of the Square V. Each family group marked out the legal amount of land allowed a rancher, and Vale saw to it that the homesteads were at once recorded in the town records. By putting up a building and making certain improvements, titles would pass into the hands of the settlers.

It was hard work. But there was plenty of pine and spruce for logs with which to build cabins, plenty of rock for foundations. Small feeder brooks or springs supplied drinking water. The river was still fouled by Kedwin's hydraulicking and the bottomlands were partially flooded as its bed was raised by the debris washing down.

Edith Thorpe lived with Murray and his wife. Carving a home from the wilderness, while it was a difficult job, was also intensely interesting, and the former gold-miners expressed their gratitude of the Rio Kid and Johnny Vale. As the cabin walls rose, they lived in their tents. The weather was warming and the keen Sierra air was a delight to breathe.

"I'll have to help 'em stock up," Vale said to the Rio Kid one evening, as they ate the good supper prepared by Chin Lee. "I got some young stuff and I'm goin' to start each man off with a few breeders. And they each have a little money they can buy with. Luckily I ain't been sellin' much the past two years and I got spare cows."

"Yuh're plumb fine, Johnny," said the Rio Kid.

He admired Vale, who had undertaken the responsibility of aiding the stranded prospectors.

Wyatt Earp, Mireles, and Professor Bolton had helped, too. They were at the table together. The night had fallen over the Sierras, and a little wind rustled the fresh leaves of the trees.

"Somebody comin' in," said Pryor, after a moment.

Men rode up to the porch, and Vale went to greet them.

"Why, howdy, Hume!" he cried. "Come in and have a bite."

It was the Wells-Fargo detective, mud-splashed, worn from riding.

His eyes were grave, his lips set. He nodded to the men who greeted him and sank down in a chair, as Chin Lee brought in hot coffee and plates of food for Hume and the two deputies who were riding with him.

"What's up?" asked the Rio Kid.

"Black Bart struck again," replied Hume. "We've been on his trail since dawn. He held up the Yreka stage last night and killed the driver. We think he came this way."

The Rio Kid's nostrils flared. Black Bart was a challenge to his manhunting instincts, just as the road-agent was to Earp's.

"So he downed a man," he growled, his trigger finger itching.

"Yes," said Hume. "It's the first time Black Bart has killed anybody."

Charles Bolton was excited, too. "Are you sure it was Black Bart?" he inquired. "I've heard a lot about the road-agent but I never heard of him killing a man before."

Hume shrugged, staring at Bolton. "The robber wore a flour sack and carried a shotgun. He ordered the driver to throw down the box as usual. Acted like Black Bart all the way through, but the driver got excited and Black Bart shot without warnin'. He even said he was Black Bart."

"I see." The professor, a man of books, was intrigued by the mysterious figure of the highwayman.

"Yuh can't trail any farther tonight," said Vale. "Stay here and rest, Hume, and we'll give yuh a start in the mornin'."

"Thanks a lot, Vale."

At dawn, the Rio Kid, Wyatt Earp, Hume and his men ate a quick meal and, saddling up, started out in pursuit of Black Bart. Hume had this time identified the hoof prints of the horse he was sure the road-agent had escaped on, and it was this sign which he had managed to follow for many miles.

IT CROSSED a mile south of the Square V, to the river, and the Rio Kid and Earp now knew the sign. But they lost it in the water and with no amount of riding up and down were they able to rediscover the sign on either side of the yellow, swollen stream.

Professor Bolton, usually a late riser, came up with them as they hunted the soggy banks.

"Any luck?" he asked Hume.

"Not yet. We're tryin' to pick up sign, Professor."

Bolton grunted. "My leg makes it difficult for me to ride. This is exciting, though, isn't it? You really think Black Bart came this way?"

Hume nodded. He was busy with his thoughts. It was irritating to have followed the trail so many miles and then have to lose it.

It was the Rio Kid who found the dead horse. It had floated downstream for over two miles, and lay on a mud bank at a curve, half in, half out of water. They hurried to investigate, and checked the animal.

"This is it," said Hume, after examining the mustang's forehoofs. "There's the two little splits making a 'y' that we've followed, Rio Kid."

"Hind leg was hurt and Black Bart shot him in the river and then escaped afoot," said Pryor. "I reckon he moved in that shallow water coverin' the bottoms and got away durin' the night, Hume."

"I'll check up on that DD brand," said Hume. "I suppose it'll turn out to be a stolen animal. Ever hear of the brand, Vale?"

The rancher shook his head. "It ain't local," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

Famous Visitors

IT WAS afternoon when the searchers for Black Bart pulled into the Square V yard, hungry, mud-splashed, saddle-weary. Professor Bolton unable to stand the pace, had left them earlier, and now he came to meet Vale. Some strange horses were standing in the shade on the front of the house.

"You have visitors, Vale," said Bolton, as he looked up at the rancher. "One is a famous man. Senator George Hearst."

"Hearst?" said Vale, dismounting. "Who's that? Oh, yeah, I savvy. The Comstock Lode man."

"He came here to see Hume," explained Bolton. "I took the liberty of having Chin Lee serve lunch and drinks to his party."

"*Bueno.* Glad yuh did."

They went inside, and a tall man with a long, prominent nose and studious eyes rose to greet them. He wore a long, bushy dark beard that was sprinkled with gray. His glance was piercing, magnetic.

Though George Hearst was over fifty, there was no dimunition of his strength and power. He owned the fabulous Ophir Mine in the Comstock Lode, Nevada, and other great properties. His clothing was expensive, his well-fitting dark blue coat, light trousers and fine boots in the height of fashion, as was his fancy vest.

Three professional-looking men were with him, men wearing high leather boots, corduroys, and straight-brimmed hats.

"Glad to see yuh, Senator Hearst," said Johnny Vale, shaking hands with the magnate. "Hope yuh were given everything yuh needed."

"Your hospitality, even when you're not here, is perfect, Vale," replied Hearst with a smile. "Professor Bolton has entertained us."

"You wanted me, Senator?" inquired J. B. Hume, stepping forward.

"Oh, yes. We met once before, I think, Hume. I was told in Stirling that you had come over here with the sheriff. My stage

was held up this morning fifty miles south of here and we were all robbed. By Black Bart."

Hume started. "Fifty miles *south* of here, Senator? Black Bart killed a man to the north of here, on the Yreka stage, yesterday. I don't see how he could have held up your stage unless he kept goin' night and day. He had to shoot one horse not far from here."

"Well, it was Black Bart, I'm sure," replied Hearst. "My men and I were occupying the stage, and we were coming up through a mountain pass when the road-agent stepped out and leveled a shotgun at us. He wore a flour sack pierced with eye-holes. 'Throw down the box!' he ordered. But there wasn't any box, and so he made us all get out, lined us up and took our valuables."

He glanced down at his vest, a dry grin about his bearded lips.

"There was a handsome watch chain there with an heirloom on one end and a gold nugget the size of an egg on the other, but Black Bart took it. He searched us through, and then one of my boys, seeing a chance, tried to jump him from the rear. But he was shot in the groin, a painful wound. We carried him to Stirling and got the doctor there."

"Black Bart shot him?" said Bolton.

"No, not Black Bart. We thought he was alone, but he had several helpers hidden on the ledge in the bushes, and it was one of these who shot my engineer."

"You're up this way on business, Senator?" asked Hume.

Hearst nodded. "Important business. When I heard from the Wells-Fargo agent that you were nearby, I hunted you up. I want my watch back. It's a wedding present given me by my wife. I'll pay five thousand dollars for it."

The Rio Kid glanced at Earp, who winked. Such a reward was fabulous, and each knew that the other was thinking he would go after the robber and recover Hearst's trinket.

"Black Bart has suddenly turned careless and ferocious, hasn't he?" said Professor Bolton, with a smile. "I've heard a good many stories about him and these holdups seem different from his usual style."

Hume shrugged. "You never can tell. When a bandit begins to kill and taste blood, he doesn't know where to draw the line. And evidently he's no longer working alone, from what Mr. Hearst says. I'll check everything, at once, Senator. I hope we can catch up with Black Bart before he disposes of your watch."

CHIN LEE served drinks, and then Hearst took his leave. He was a quiet man, with a deep sense of humor. Shaking hands with Vale, he thanked him for his hospitality.

"You have a pretty place here, sir. Perhaps I'll be back to see you again." He nodded, and smiled, getting into his saddle with a young man's alacrity.

His engineers mounted, and they set out on the trail to Stirling, while Hume, the Rio Kid, Wyatt Earp and Mireles, made plans to hurry to the most recent of Black Bart's crimes.

They started south after a brief rest. But this time they were not as lucky as Hume had been before. There was no sign that they were able to follow for more than a few miles, and after tearing around the Sierras, searching the folds and canyons, they had to confess that the road-agent had again eluded them.

Two days after Hearst's visit to the Square V, the Rio Kid, Earp and Mireles pulled in at the ranch toward dusk. They were tired out, and slept without waking until daylight.

While they were eating a late breakfast the next morning, Shorty, out in the side corral with some mustangs, shouted and came to the open window to speak to Johnny Vale, who was sitting with his guests.

"Here comes Kedwin, Lownes, and fifteen, twenty riders!" warned Shorty. "Armed to the teeth!"

The tidings brought them instantly to their feet. They snatched up shotguns and rifles, making sure their weapons were loaded and ready, while Shorty called in Ben Agnes and Red Phillips, Vale's loyal punchers, from a nearby field.

By the time they were organized, with the Rio Kid at their head, Fred Kedwin, Smoky Lownes and their riders were within a hundred yards of the house.

"Halt, Kedwin!" called the Rio Kid, his feet spread wide and his hands hanging loose at his Colt-girded hips.

In the doorway behind them, Professor Bolton peered timidly out through his spectacles at sight of the armed array. Kedwin was slightly in the fore, with two lines of eight or ten men behind him and his shadow, Smoky Lownes, at his right. Lownes kept his eyes steadily on the Rio Kid, his right hand draped at his hip, close to the big Colt.

"He's coverin' Kedwin," decided the Rio Kid, "in case I try for him."

He did not see Zaldini, the big rustler chieftain, but most of the fellows with Kedwin looked tough, and Pryor recognized them as Zaldini's bunch.

Kedwin held up his hand in a sign of friendship. "Johnny Vale," he called, "I want to talk to you."

Vale strode out, frowning. He hated Kedwin, who had brought such sorrow to Edith Thorpe, and who had partially wrecked his range, with his reckless hydraulic mining.

"What yuh want, Kedwin?" he demanded in a surly voice. "I'd rather you and yore rustler pards stayed off my range, savvy? I'll give yuh two minutes to get goin'—then we open fire."

Kedwin stared at the array of hard-fighting men lined on Vale's veranda. Though he had more men with him, Earp, the Rio Kid and the others on that veranda could easily take care

BLACK BART

THIS mysterious lone wolf robber terrorized northern California and the Sierra country for many years. He held up stages in the narrow mountain gaps. Wearing a flour sack with eye-holes and a linen duster, he carried a double-barreled shotgun with which he covered the driver and guard.

"Throw down the box!" was always his first order, in a deep, hollow voice.

The "box" would be the Wells-Fargo chest containing the gold from various mines. Polite but firm, Black Bart would get the loot. After forcing the driver to unhitch his horses and take them some distance away, he would retire, smash the box with an old ax and disappear in one of the thousands of hiding places in the hills.

He became a giant, invincible, in the minds of California people. At last J. B. Hume, a Wells-Fargo detective, after him for a long while, managed to run Black Bart to earth. He proved to be a slender, genteel fellow born in New York, who had small feet, a heavy mustache, iron-gray hair, a large head, and was 5 ft. 8 in. in height. His eyes were deep-set, with heavy brows; his chin square and small. His meek appearance was a terrific let-down from what the popular imagination had built up.

He went to prison for his crimes.

of them out in the open as they were.

"I haven't come to fight, Vale. I came to tell you I'm mighty sorry about that hydraulicking. I didn't realize how much damage it's doing your range."

Kedwin spoke softly, apologetically, and Vale and the Rio Kid listened in stunned silence. Seeing they did not mean to shoot on sight, Kedwin slowly advanced, with only Lownes beside him, so that he could talk more easily.

"Yuh goin' to quit washin' the topsoil and mountain down into my valley?" said Vale at last. "If yuh're sorry like yuh say, Kedwin, that's what yuh'll do."

Kedwin made a gesture of objection but his voice was polite as he said quickly:

"But I have a valuable gold mine up there, Vale. I can't quit without losing a fortune, and then someone else would come along and do the same thing to you if I sold out, or deserted the claim."

"Make yore spiel, Kedwin," ordered the Rio Kid coldly. "Shivers run up and down my backbone at sight of serpents." He shuddered realistically. "And my gun hand itches somethin' horrible."

But he was intensely curious and wondered what actually had brought his enemy to the Square V to talk as he did.

A flush reddened Kedwin's heavy, jowled face. His mustache bristled, the white scar showing through. He controlled himself by an effort.

"My business is with Vale, Rio Kid," he growled.

"The Rio Kid's a friend of mine, Kedwin," snapped Vale. "And that's more'n I can say for you. Let's hear what yuh got to say, then mebbe we can breathe the air ag'in."

"I'm sorry you feel this way, Vale. Perhaps I was a bit hasty before."

"Hasty!" Vale laughed, incredulous. "If yuh call what you done to the Rio Kid and them pore folks yuh cheated, to say nothin' of Colonel Thorpe—" He broke off short as the Rio Kid nudged him.

KEDWIN didn't say anything for a moment but stared at them steadily.

"You mean Thorpe killed himself?" he asked carefully.

"Yeah, that's what I mean," replied Vale, glad to get out of it so easily.

He had known for some time that Kedwin or his men had shot Thorpe, and he was not used to deception. He had almost blurted out the fact that the Rio Kid had discovered Thorpe was murdered.

"I'm sorry for what's happened," Kedwin repeated. "I'm here to make what amends I can. The hydraulicking will wreck yore range completely in time. I'd like to settle this feud between us, and that's why I'm here, to make you an offer for yore lands."

"So that's it!" thought the Rio Kid, his brain busy with conjecture. But all he could conclude at the moment was that Kedwin would never do anything that was fair, just to be decent.

"What do yuh offer, Kedwin?" he asked curiously. "Mebbe yuh'd like to buy a nice gold mine up the river."

Wyatt Earp grinned at Pryor's ironic jest. But Kedwin solemnly nodded.

"That will be included, of course. You know it petered out. Vale, I'll buy your range and the hills to the north."

"I don't hold them hills. The folks yuh cheated own 'em, section by section, and duly recorded."

Kedwin cleared his throat. "I see. I'm willin' to pay you and them a fair sum, though, to make up for what I've done."

"Huh." The Rio Kid watched his foe. He could see that behind his smooth front Kedwin was tense, eager. "What's he got up his sleeve?" he mused. "That skunk wouldn't do a fair thing if his life depended on it!"

"I ain't thinkin' of sellin'," drawled Vale. "But I might if the price was right."

"Set your figure," said Kedwin instantly.

As Vale hesitated, the Rio Kid said, "Don't sell to him, Vale, not at any price!"

Kedwin scowled. He held himself in with a great effort.

"I'd like to talk business with you, Vale, if we could do it without being interrupted."

Vale laughed. "I was only foolin' yuh, Kedwin. I wouldn't sell yuh a dead cow for a million dollars!"

"Get goin', Kedwin," ordered the Rio Kid. "I can't stomach the sight of yuh any longer. I don't know what yore game is, but I'll find out."

Kedwin glared, and his mustache bristled. He gritted his teeth but managed, with the Rio Kid's guns what they were, to control himself. Pryor would have welcomed a showdown. He stepped off the porch, moving toward Kedwin, meaning to pull him off his horse and slap him.

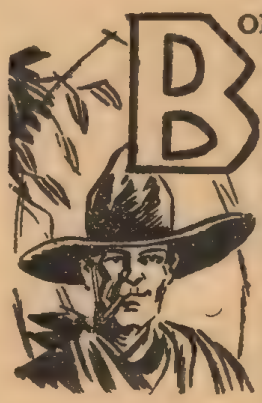
But with a curt, "Come on, Smoky," Kedwin turned his black and rode off among his men.

"Dog my hide!" exclaimed the Rio Kid, staring after them. "That beats all get-out, boys! I don't know why I didn't gun that polecat on sight but his talk amazed me so I was paralyzed!"

"Me, too." Johnny Vale nodded. "What's his game?"

CHAPTER IX

Kedwin's



BOB PRYOR turned in early, but slept little, because the question Johnny Vale had asked nagged at him. He dozed for a couple of hours. When he awoke, moonlight streamed in at the window of the little room he shared with Celestino Mireles. For a time he lay on his back, his ears alert. And again he began to think about Fred Kedwin, trying to figure out what Kedwin might be up to now. He rolled a quirly and lighted it. The scratch of the match wakened Celestino, and the Mexican sat up.

"What ees, General?" he asked softly.

"Nothin', Celestino. Go back to sleep."

"*Si.*"

It was not the Rio Kid's habit to lie awake nights. He slept on a hair trigger, attuned to danger. But he was restless, and the urge to check up on Kedwin's activities grew too strong for a man of action. He sat up, pulling on his boots; as he buckled on his guns, Mireles got up and came to him.

"Where you go, General?"

"I'm headin' up to that hydraulickers' camp."

"I go, *si?*" begged Mireles.

"All right. Let's saddle up. Quiet, now, don't wake the others."

The wide window was open, and Pryor went out first, making only the faintest of sounds. The moon was well up, bathing the yard in silver light, and making buildings stand out black against the sky. Moving silently, with Mireles at his heels, the Rio Kid started for the corral where Saber and the Mexican's mount ran.

As he reached the back of the house he paused, put out a hand to warn Celestino, who froze with him.

A man was standing there in the moonlit yard, his back to them. After a time he turned, and the Rio Kid, peering from the corner of

Chin Lee's cook shed, recognized him.

"Why, Perfessor," he said, his voice low. "What yuh doin' out this time of night?"

Charles Bolton knew Pryor's voice. He came toward the two.

"I slipped out, not wanting to disturb anybody, Rio Kid," he said. "I'm troubled with insomnia, you know. And you?"

"Tell Vale and Earp in the mornin', if we're not back, that I went up to check on some important matters, Perfessor." Earp would know.

"I will."

They slipped to the corral, slapped on leather, and started north up the creek trail. It was soggy in spots, where Kedwin's hydraulicking had flooded the bottoms. A cool breeze fanned their faces as they rode. They picked up speed as the horses warmed.

"We can make it well before dawn," remarked the Rio Kid. "Yuh'll be mighty handy to hold the hosses, Celestino. I got to check up on Kedwin."

"*Si*, General." Mireles was never so happy as when he was on a danger trail with the Rio Kid.

They had had many adventures together and had survived numerous desperate fights.

AN HOUR out from the track rising into the low-domed foothills in which Vale had settled Thorpe's friends, the Rio Kid drew up, and stared at the black patch of woods near which Murray had built his new log cabin. Edith Thorpe lived there with the Murrays.

A small rill which had its source in some big springs that came out of the rocks in the woods, trickled noisily down the slope to join the river. The wind rustled the bush, and the *clop-clop* of hoofs made it difficult to hear sounds. That was why the Rio Kid had paused.

"Yuh hear a yell, Celestino?" he asked his friend.

"I theenk maybe, General."

The wind was still coming from their left. Then, in the night, a sharp though faint explosion which the Rio Kid could not mistake, reached them.

"Gunshot!" he said, swinging the dun. As they started up the slope, a rattling volley banged out. "Sounds like it's at Murray's!"

It was. Reaching a high point to the south of the cabin, the Rio Kid could make out the shape of the cabin against the sky. Gun flashes told him that riders were firing at the place, and then he saw a rifle blaze from a narrow window in the log wall. Murray was defending his home.

The Rio Kid moved in, drawing a Colt, and Mireles had his carbine up and ready. A flame showed, red fire from burning dry brush that was moving swiftly toward the rear of the shack.

"Draggin' it on a lariat," muttered Pryor. "Goin' to burn 'em out!"

The fire disappeared behind Murray's shack and did not come out on the other side. A horseman had towed the burning stuff to the wooden wall, and dropped it there, to smoke out the inhabitants. Blasting guns kept Murray busy at the front, where the single door was. Cold fury in his heart — Edith Thorpe and Murray's wife were in there — sent the Rio Kid hurtling in.

A red glow was rising, and against it, Pryor saw masked horsemen shooting at the windows. He threw up his gun and opened fire. A rider fell from his saddle, got up, and staggered away into the darkness of the woods. Mireles' carbine whipped its snapping slugs along the line.

Saber moved swiftly, but he knew how to give his rider a steady stance from which to shoot. Battle-wise, he loved the bang of guns and the smell of powder. His eyes burned red and his nostrils widened.

"Take the left, Celestino!" ordered Pryor.

He pulled a fresh Colt, and rapped bullets at the attackers. Mireles, swerving off, fired from the other side. Their lead stung the foe, and the dark riders swung to face the threat to their rear.

"Come on, boys, give 'em plenty!" roared the Rio Kid. "Swing them wings around and circle 'em!"

His commander's voice rang over the battle din. It reached the gunnies' ears, and in moments Pryor caught the shouted orders of the gunny leader.

"Pull off, before they close in on us, boys!"

The Rio Kid's ruse had thrown a scare into them. It sounded as though Pryor and the Mexican were but the van of a large party.

The attackers rode around and melted into the woods, and the Rio Kid and Mireles hurried up to the cabin to throw buckets of water on the blaze at the rear.

"Murray!" he called. "You all right! It's the Rio Kid."

Murray knew his voice. He answered, came to unbolt his front door. Edith Thorpe, her face white in the dim light, and Dora Murray with her arm about the girl, stood at the side. They had thrown on wraps, and prepared to help Murray defend the cabin.

"Who were those men, Rio Kid?" cried Murray. He had a heavy rifle in one hand, with which he had been fighting.

Pryor shrugged. "Couldn't make out any of 'em with their masks on, and in the night, Murray, but I'll guarantee they ain't enemies of Fred Kedwin."

"Kedwin! But why should he attack me this way? I've never done him any harm."

"Nor did Thorpe or any of the folks he's cheated. But I hope to."

"Is Johnny with you, Rio Kid?" asked Edith.

"No, ma'am. Just Celestino. I'm in a hurry, Murray, and we'll be movin' on. I don't reckon those gunnies'll be back, but be on the watch."

"Thanks, Rio Kid," said Murray gratefully. "You've sure saved us."

Moving on, Pryor cut down, and they forded

the river, the water dripping from the sleek flanks of the horses.

"I don't like this, Celestino. We got to find out Kedwin's game and check him. All of his bunch wasn't at Murray's, either. He's got more fighters than that."

He felt the dark menace of Kedwin over the range, and a sense of urgency drove him on rapidly. He must check Kedwin, but first he must try to uncover the enemy's plans.

With this in mind, he rode the east bank of the river, toward Kedwin's.

"We'll work around to the far side, and I'll go in the last quarter-mile afoot, Celestino. I don't want 'em to savvy I'm near, and they'll shore watch the road on account of what they been up to tonight."

"Si."

They skirted the base of the mountain, its slopes dark with pine and spruce and the juttings of great rocks. The ravine of the stream cut them off from Kedwin's camp now.

"Look, General!" Mireles exclaimed, glancing back.

Pryor looked around. In the distance, toward Vale's, a red glow showed in the sky.

"Why, that's near where Vern Wilson built his house!"

It was too late to turn back now. Kedwin must have split his riders and struck two ranchers at once.

"Come on, boys," muttered the Rio Kid, cold fury in his heart. "We'll go after 'em."

Two hours later, he left Mireles holding the horses in a spruce grove which completely concealed them, and with his pistols loaded and ready, started to cross the upper ravine. He was above Kedwin's camp in the wilds of the mountains.

IT TOOK time to make a careful descent to the bottom of the ravine, and more to reach the other side, with the swift river roaring below in its rocky bed. Pryor had taken off his boots and substituted a pair of thick moccasins for better footing. Spurs and riding gear would have been a handicap now.

Up on the west brink, he squatted in the shadows, checking the surroundings. It was quiet save for the noise of the river, and he flitted on. Soon he came across a big pipe, through which water had run downhill to feed Kedwin's hoses. The intake was well up the mountain and the river could be diverted into it at will. Testing it by hand, the Rio Kid found it was empty, and he recalled that the stream had run full when he had crossed it below.

Moving down, keeping near the pipe, which was propped on boulders and cut logs, he came to the outskirts of Kedwin's mountain camp.

Men were stirring in there, and against the great expanse of moonlit sky over the foothills and Vale's valley he saw sentinels watching the road up the mountain. A couple of low-burning lanterns showed in the tents and brush shacks, and a cook fire where a big pot of steaming coffee was being brewed attracted several gunnies.

Expert at tracking men, the Rio Kid could move with an Indian's stealth.

He chose his course in among patches of shadow from low bush or big rocks, and moved even closer.

Kedwin would kill him if he caught him. From what he had seen that night, the Rio Kid was certain that his enemy had become desperate, entirely ruthless.

The attack on Murray, and the fire in the sky had told him that.

Then he sighted Kedwin, bundled in a heavy jacket and with a felt hat pulled down over his eyes. Kedwin emerged from a tent, which had a lantern burning yellow in front of it.

"What time is it, Smoky?" Kedwin asked.

"Three-thirty," replied Lownes.

"Well, the Rio Kid hasn't showed yet. If he'd trailed you from Murray's he'd have been here by now. I—"

A warning call was passed up the line from below.

"Mebbe that's the Rio Kid and his bunch!" cried Lownes, leaping to his feet and snatching up a rifle.

But whoever it was came on, and a bunch of men, which the Rio Kid estimated hurriedly at twenty or twenty-five, appeared and entered the camp.

"Zaldini!" said Kedwin, greeting the rustler. "I'm glad you're back. You made it pronto, and I see you had plenty of luck."

"Yeah, yeah." The big man in black leather grinned as he dismounted. "I picked up with a bunch of hombres I used to work with in Shasta. They're all right, Kedwin. Good men."

They wore Stetsons and leather, carried heavy guns, their metal accoutrements jingling as they dismounted and squatted near the fire, drinking coffee and liquor that was served them. The Rio Kid, downwind from them, could catch their talk.

"We started tonight," said Kedwin, to bring Zaldini up to date, "and I took half the boys and hit Wilson's place. Drove him out and shot him down. But Smoky made a mess of his job. The Rio Kid came along and run him off."

"I'll fix the Rio Kid this time," promised Zaldini. "I got a bone to pick with that sidewinder, and another one with Johnny Vale. We're strong enough to wipe out the Square V, Boss, and the whole valley, like you want."

"We'll have to make it fast," said Kedwin. "They're warned now. It's too late tonight, but tomorrow ought to be time enough. Have your men get some sleep and take it easy so they'll be in shape."

"Bueno. I'll guarantee we win, Kedwin. Them miners we had fightin' were tough, but they ain't perfessional fightin' men like these boys."

CHAPTER X

Drygulched

MURMURS of talking men came from the big camp, alive with the Rio Kid's foes. Dawn was not far off and he began his slow retreat. At last he reached a point where he could rise up and move with better speed.

The stars were paling, the moon was low on the horizon. Grayness had suddenly come into the eastern sky. As the new day spread its light over the world, the Rio Kid turned, well above Kedwin's. Crouched near the dead pipeline, he observed the camp. Alert guards were on the trail from the valley, ready to call the alarm in case of danger from that direction.

He could see the big hoses which the hydraulickers had used, piled in snaky coils near the raw, sickish washout which men had made, a cancer in the mountain's breast. It had been tremendously enlarged since last he had seen it on his visit to Kedwin's with Vale. From what he had overheard, he gathered that the miners had gone. The water no longer moved in the big pipe, the hoses were coiled, the diggings not being worked.

"Must have petered out," he thought. "Kedwin bought hisself somethin' he mebbe wishes he hadn't."

It was some consolation to realize that Fred Kedwin, who had brought death and ruin, had failed. He had quickly spent the embezzled money on equipment and labor for the hydraulicking, only to be disappointed.

The Rio Kid withdrew, climbed down into the gorge and went up the steep eastern side.

Celestino anxiously awaited him with the horses, and the sun was turning from red to yellow in the sky as they began the descent, well around from Kedwin's.

"Kedwin's hydraulickin' has gone bad on him, Celestino," Pryor said. "I'm shore of it. They've turned the river back into its channel and the hoses are coiled. Miners gone, too. But he's fetched in a new gang to add to Zaldini's cow thieves, and they mean business. They're aimin' to wipe out all the folks hereabouts."

Mireles grunted, his keen, sharp face silhouetted against the sun.

"We feex 'em, General, *si!*"

"*Si.*"

It was a long way around. They had to leave the river, to avoid coming in sight of Kedwin's, and skirt some foothills before cutting back and crossing the stream. Headed for Johnny Vale's Square V, to sound the alarm, the Rio Kid rode the dun swiftly, low in the saddle.

The sun was well up now, warm and golden. It dried the cool dankness of the mountain night and morning from their bones.

Suddenly the Rio Kid threw up his head, wheeling Saber.

He glanced back at Mireles, coming at his heels, riding with the Mexican's magnificent insouciance.

Guns were barking over the ridge. Near Vale's place! The Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles touched with spurs and rode ahead as fast as their mounts could move. . . .

Johnny Vale felt the terrible impact of the bullet in his left side, under his heart. It took all his breath from his lungs, and all the strength from his body.

His mustang, a half-wild thing he had broken in for range riding, snorted and shied as the heavy rifle explosion banged across the draw. The rancher, expert rider that he was, was utterly powerless to check his mount, unable to keep his viselike grip on the barrel ribs of the horse. He slid off and hit the stony ground, rolling a couple of yards, and bringing up against a rock that stuck up from the earth. It ground into his wounded side but still he could only lie helpless.

Yet he was conscious. It was, however, a nightmare awareness. Pain such as he had never before experienced, made his big body shudder with spasms of it. The shock was so great that he could not pull himself out, despite his youth and strength.

Another bullet hit the rock against which he had brought up, spraying him with flint and shattered bits of lead. But it made no difference.

He hardly noticed anything. Blackness broken by flashing, star-studded waves of light, was upon him.

A third slug hunted him but he was huddled in a ball against the rock that sheltered him from the drygulchers. They were not sure of him. They thought he might be playing possum. A Stetson on a carbine barrel showed across the draw as they sought to draw his fire.

VALE'S anguish increased. He fought to move but he could not.

"Edith!" he muttered, hoarsely. He had been on his way to see her that morning, to make certain she was all right. Bolton had told him that the Rio Kid and Mireles had ridden off on some important mission and it might concern her.

He was in the low-domed hills which he had formerly used as part of his range, and which now belonged to his friends, whom he had settled there.

A man jumped up on the other side of the draw, and ran, head down and rifle held slantwise in one hand, for a bunch of rocks fringing the brink.

He was seeking to get a better angle so that he could pour lead into Vale.

"Edith!"

Only that name was in Johnny Vale's mind, but still he was vaguely able to realize that he had seen the skulking drygulcher. A second one came into sight for an instant, across the shallow draw, overgrown with manzanita bushes.

Zaldini the big rustler chief!

The drygulchers still feared that Vale might be playing dead or hurt, to get them in his sights.

From around the side of the big sheltering boulder, Johnny Vale watched them. One of Zaldini's killers, was raising his rifle, sighting along the barrel to try for his brain.

Some of the first shock had worn off. Vale felt the sharp rock point sticking into his side, and managed to move, perhaps an inch or two. The pain was so intense that his breath left him and he moaned, sank back.

The first slug from the drygulcher's position cut into the damp ground an inch from Vale's cheek.

"I've got—got to move," he mumbled.

He gathered all his strength to fight his faintness. With a supreme effort, Vale rolled to one side. Gravity helped and he drew up his legs, his body in a ball behind the boulder as the next bullet struck where his head had been.

"He's hurt bad, Zaldini!" called the rifleman. "He can move, though!"

"You cut around thataway," ordered Zaldini, with a wave of his hand. "Chuck and me'll go the other."

Johnny Vale lay huddled there, feeling his life blood flowing from the jagged tear in his side. As if in a faraway dream he had heard Zaldini's shouts. He knew who had ordered him killed. Fred Kedwin—no doubt about that.

Zaldini was only Kedwin's hired gunman.

Many thoughts flashed through Johnny Vale's mind. He remembered the dream he had had of winning Edith Thorpe, of laying his big ranch and all that he had built up through years of hard work and acuteness in his business dealings as a cowman at her feet. He had done well, too, for the California mining towns were avid markets for food and produce of all kinds, and for horses.

Vale had never been interested in mining. More, he knew that the men who made the money, except for a few big operators who bought up and developed holdings, were the storekeepers and others who catered to the gold-maddened.

It was with sickening regret that he found himself dying. He was young and he was in love.

He had hoped for so much, only to be caught by a skulking rustler's slug.

He blamed himself, too.

"Shouldn't have ridden out alone, knowin' all I do about Kedwin!" he thought. He tried to shake his head, but it hurt too much.

They were coming. His hearing seemed hyper-acute, for each heavy-booted step, each roll of pebble or rustle of bush, reached him. They were going to finish him off. He gritted his teeth, and moved his right hand. It was painful to shift even the slightest bit, but he kept it up until his fingers touched the butt of his Colt.

Teeth grinding and eyes rolling in agony, Vale tried to fight to the last. He got his revolver from its sheath and managed to pull back the hammer under his thumb by a tremendous effort.

He held the gun in his hand, letting its weight rest on the ground, waiting, waiting, shielding it with his drawn-up legs.

The sounds of their approach ceased. They were checking up.

"He ain't moved since my last shot," one of the men said.

"Let's go in and finish the skunk," replied Zaldini.

They had rounded the draw and crossed, to circle Vale.

"I'll take Zaldini with me if I can," thought Vale.

THROUGH his dropped lashes he could see the man who raised his rifle. The rustler could now take a direct bead on Vale, since he had passed beyond the bulge of the protecting boulder. He was not fifty yards off, and Vale watched the muzzle as it came into killing position.

He made his last play, trying to raise his Colt and fire. The explosion of his revolver so close to his face stunned him. His ears reverberated with the echoes.

"I—I got him!" he choked.

The drygulcher had staggered. His rifle went off but the bullet hit the ground yards from Vale.

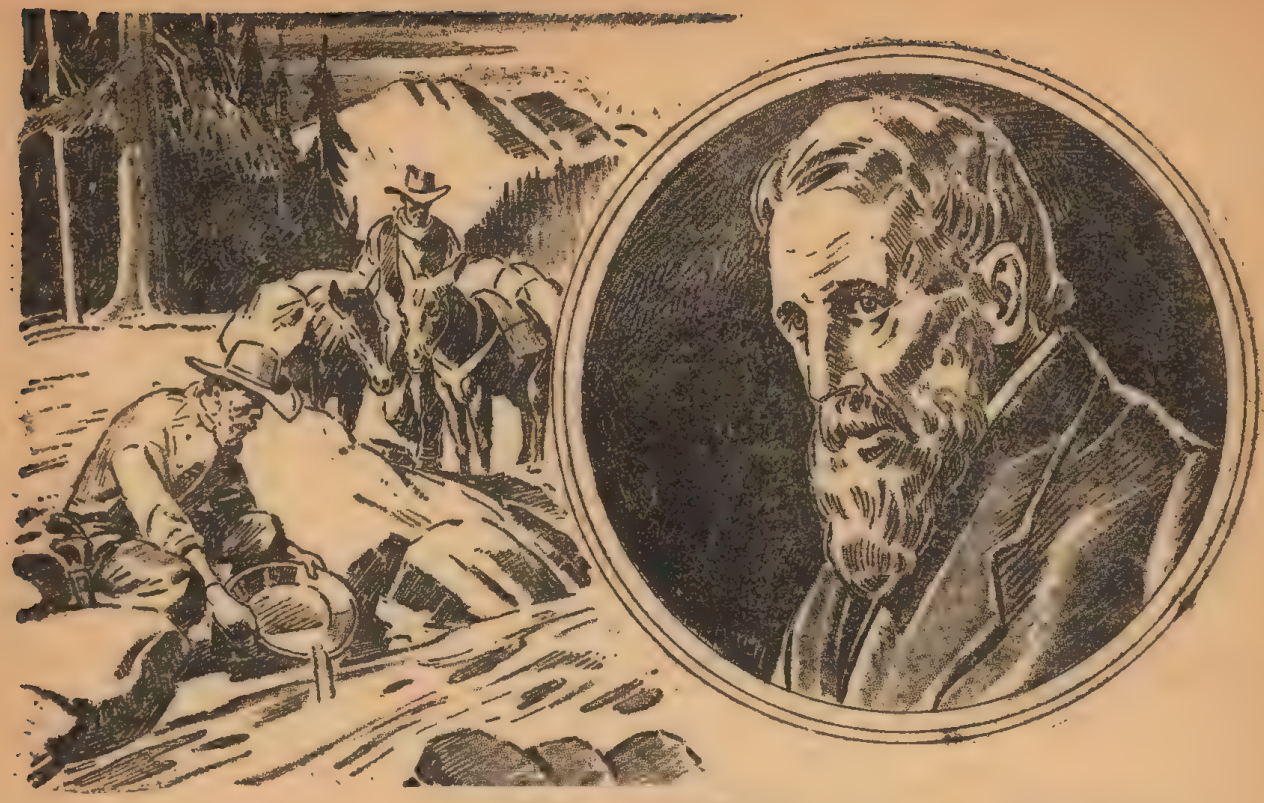
Zaldini jumped up, cursing and raving like a madman. The big fellow began shooting past Vale's rock, so intent on the kill that he didn't even see the two other men who suddenly had appeared on the slope behind him. But the two saw him and, with cold fury, the Rio Kid and Celestino opened up on Zaldini and the rustler who still was on his feet.

The man who had been drawing a death bead on Johnny Vale lay silent, face down, his rifle having flown off from him as he hit. The Rio Kid had sent a bullet between his shoulders as he had risen up to kill Vale.

"There's Zaldini!" cried Pryor, urging the dun up the rocky slope from the river.

The shooting had brought them. They had passed Vale's mustang with the Square V on its flank, and in moments more had recognized Zaldini's man, one of those he had seen at Kedwin's and had heard called "Chuck," as well as on the range. He had guessed that the huddled target by the rock must be Vale, and had acted.

"Let's see how many's with him!" he called



GEORGE HEARST

BORN in Missouri, in 1820, George Hearst crossed the plains on foot in 1850, walking beside an ox wagon. He was a tall, strong man with a long nose and deep-set eyes, and wore a long, bushy beard.

Getting into prospecting and mining, he came to own the fabulous Ophir Mine of the Comstock Lode, Nevada. Later, he was in on the Anaconda strike in Montana and other great mineral finds.

He lived on a lavish scale, and started newspapers, which his son, William Randolph Hearst, took up and developed into a great chain.

He was a silent man, and had a humorous bent. He was one of the richest men in the country when he died in 1891.

to Celestino. But Zaldini and Chuck were already running, full-tilt, turning only to throw delaying lead back at the attacking Rio Kid.

They crossed the draw, and reached some pine woods beyond, speeded by their own panic.

The draw blocked Pryor and the Mexican from pursuing on horseback, without making a wide detour.

The Rio Kid snatched his carbine, hit the dirt, and knelt to firing position.

Zaldini and Chuck galloped from the woods, heading around the hill, with the mustang of the downed man in tow. It was long range but the Rio Kid opened up. His first one missed and Zaldini swerved, Chuck right behind him. As Pryor fired the carbine again, Chuck's horse stumbled, and fell.

Chuck was thrown head over heels from the saddle. The rustler landed on his shoulders, and rolled.

The led horse slowed, his reins dragging. Chuck jumped to his feet, hit the saddle in a bound, and spurred off in Zaldini's wake. His own brown mustang lay dead behind him.

"General!"

Mireles had stopped and dismounted, to go to Johnny Vale. Now he squatted near the rancher's head.

The Rio Kid cursed, as he watched Zaldini and Chuck hightail it around the hill out of sight and range. It had been a long shot which had killed Chuck's horse. He turned the dun and trotted Saber back, getting down to see how bad it was with Johnny Vale.

Mireles' face told him, without the Mexican speaking. A terrible spill of blood stained the ground, and Vale's whole left side was bathed in it.

The Rio Kid who had fought through the four awful years of the Civil War knew gunshot wounds, and first aid. He did the best he could. He and the young Mexican made a crude litter of branches and slickers, but when they lifted it with Vale on it, he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XI

Her Choice

SLOWLY the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles carried Vale to his ranch when Pryor had skillfully checked the worst of the bleeding.

Chin Lee chattered with appalled alarm as he saw his boss fetched in. He ran about, excited, but quickly had Vale's bed ready and hot water on the cook-stove. There was a doctor in Stirling and the Rio Kid started Shorty over for him at once.

Wyatt Earp and Professor Bolton helped, and Vale's other men stood about, faces strained, ready to assist.

Bolton listened as the Rio Kid told Earp what had happened.

"Wyatt, Kedwin's gone loco! He means to wipe out these new settlers and Vale, too. I ain't shore why, but I'll find out. It must be the same reason he had for tryin' to buy out Vale. And I'd like to know where Kedwin would get enough money to buy the Square V like he offered. Far as I can make out, he spent all he could steal on that hydraulickin' proposition and it's gone bad. He's sent his miners away, but he's brought in more gunnies under Zaldini."

Bolton's spectacled eyes grew interested.

"Why, Rio Kid, I believe you've hit it!" he cried excitedly.

"Huh? Hit what?" The Rio Kid stared curiously at the slight little pedant.

"The explanation of many things," replied Bolton gravely. "I'll admit that I've been intrigued by Black Bart, the road-agent. I heard of him before, when I first came to California, and I've made a study of his exploits—chiefly, of course, from hearing about them."

The two manhunters listened, secretly amused at such a meek person's fancy being caught by Black Bart, the Terror of the Sierra. In the public imagination, the bandit loomed with the power of a shadowy giant. But as Pryor listened to Bolton's keen explanation, he decided that a thinker might be of as much or more use than a man of action.

"'Steal,' you said," continued Bolton. "Kedwin had to have money, a great deal of it, to pay his workmen up there. From what you've said before, he spent a large amount, as much as he got from Thorpe and the man's friends, on equipment and getting started with the hydraulicking. Suppose such a man found he needed cash, to pay wages, to buy food? Would he hesitate at anything?"

"Nothin' I ever heard of," replied the Rio Kid.

"Then he would steal. The quickest way would be to hold up stages, wouldn't it? You told me Kedwin was on the stage held up by Black Bart. Was that so?"

"Yeah, he was."

"That would give him the pattern, the idea, do you see? Hume and you couldn't believe that Black Bart could hit so quickly in so many different places, and from what I've heard, he's been accused of a dozen holdups in a few days. And killings, too, to say nothing of having accomplices in his crimes! Why, Black Bart always worked alone, and never injured a person before, and yet you expect it to be believed that he's suddenly turned into a wanton killer and a fool!"

The Rio Kid thought it over. "By glory, Perfessor, yuh've hit the nail on the haid. Now let's see. I downed Chuck's hoss and it's still layin' out there. Meant to look the saddle-bags over, but I was in a hurry to fetch in Vale."

"We better get goin', Rio Kid, and warn these other folks," said Earp. He was cool, phlegmatic, in the face of any danger.

"Yuh're right, Wyatt. The first thing to do is bring 'em all here to the Square V where we can watch over 'em till we finish off Fred Kedwin. Let's go."

"Let me help, please!" begged Bolton, excitedly. "It's hard for me to ride, but I can stay in the saddle for an hour or two and I want to assist. Can we pass near the spot where you killed the mustang, Rio Kid, on our way to help our friends?"

"Shore. It's not far from Murray's. Let's go."

"After Vale left this mornin'," said Earp, "we had word from Murray that Vern Wilson had been killed by masked robbers last night. The shack was burnt to the ground, but Mrs. Wilson and the two kids run out and got into the woods. They hid and finally reached Murray's after the skunks had lit out."

Pryor nodded sadly. "I heard of it at Kedwin's, Wyatt. But let's start our messengers before it's too late. We ain't got much time."

He left a man with Chin Lee to watch over Vale, and sent single riders off to various points to warn the settlers to hurry to the Square V. Alone in his cabin, each man could be killed. Gathered together at the big ranch, they had a chance of fighting off the enemy, though Kedwin had doubled his forces.

BEN AGNES started for Donovan's place, and on the way he could warn the Jacksons. Earp was to bring in Larry Tate's family, and Tate's son-in-law, Len Keith. There were two more families, and Celestino promised to reach them and give the warning, while the Rio Kid started for Murray's, where Edith lived and where Mrs. Wilson and her children had taken refuge.

"You ride with me, Perfessor," he said to Bolton, "and we'll take a look-see at that bandit's hoss on the way."

He helped the inexpert Bolton saddle up. It

was with difficulty that the lame scholar mounted, one leg stiff. He grunted a bit as the jolting of the tame horse under him shook him up, but gritted his teeth and followed the Rio Kid.

The sun was blazing hot when they reached the spot where the Rio Kid had shot Chuck's horse from under him. The dead drygulcher still lay across the draw, and myriad flies and insects swarmed about the body and the carcass of the mustang. It bore a DD brand and no doubt was one of the bunch stolen by Zaldini and his rustlers. Above, in the clear blue sky, vultures wheeled, and a quiet that seemed deathly pervaded the Sierras.

"How about the other one?" asked Bolton. "It's under the horse.

Bob Pryor hitched his lariat to the dead weight of the stiffened animal. On Saber, he pulled it over, and they searched the second saddle-bag. Almost at once, Bolton pulled forth a folded flour sack. He shook it out, and there were eye-holes in it.

"Black Bart's trademark!" he cried.

The Rio Kid whistled. "Detective Hume'll be mighty interested in this, Perfessor! We better check a bit more, though."

"Why? Isn't it plain? Kedwin has had a number of his men pose as Black Bart, and they've robbed stage after stage to get money for him and themselves. It explains everything."

The Rio Kid scratched his head. "Not everything, but one angle, Perfessor. The big thing is why Kedwin's goin' to such lengths just now. And we got to run Murray and his pards in where we can look after 'em."

Bolton rode with him to Murray's.

Edith Thorpe met the Rio Kid outside. She had been washing clothes, and was hanging them in the sun. She smiled up at the handsome, debonair Kid and, as always at her smile, his heart leaped. When he was near her, looking at her, he felt that he would be willing to give up the world for her. There was a gentle sadness in her face that made her more beautiful than when he had first seen her.

"You heard about the Wilsons?" she asked.

"Yes'm. Is Vern's wife here?"

"Yes, she is, and the children, too. Dora's with her, and the children are out in the woods with Rob." Her clear eyes searched his. "I thought Johnny might be over today. Is he busy?"

The Rio Kid cleared his throat. "Johnny's hurt. He took a drygulcher's slug in the side this mornin', Edith."

Her eyes widened and she had a difficult time catching hold of herself.

"Is—is it bad?" she asked at last.

She had received a terrible shock when her father had died, and now this blow. Life had been hard for her since she had come to the Sierras. There was deep pain in her eyes.

"He's got a fifty-fifty chance, I reckon," re-

[*Turn page*]

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plied the Rio Kid. "I sent for the sawbones. But I'll need to see Murray. Which way did he go?"

"He's just up the hill, in the woods, cutting spruce."

The Rio Kid found Murray sawing logs into sections. Nearby a pretty little girl of six and a boy of eight were playing, under Murray's eye.

Pryor shook hands. He heard Murray's story of how Vern Wilson's wife, broken, her clothing torn and muddy, had staggered to his home after hours of hiding and wandering with the children in the woods.

"It must have been more of that gang which attacked us," growled Murray.

"Part of the same," the Rio Kid told him. "Kedwin's gone on the warpath. Zaldini's fetched in more gunnies, and they're out to wipe you from the face of the earth, and Vale, too."

He gave Murray a quick sketch of all that had happened. Murray whistled, his lean face grave.

"What'll we do, then?"

"I'm callin' all yore friends to the Square V. We can have a fightin' chance there, in case Kedwin strikes. Fact is, tonight is the time they set, if they don't switch it." And he added, "Pack up what yuh can and let's head for Vale's pronto."

When they reached the cabin, Edith Thorpe had a mare saddled.

"I'm going to see if I can help Johnny," she said.

AN HOUR later, Murray and his family left their new ranch. The women and children were in the big wagon, piled with belongings they wished to save, for Pryor was sure Kedwin would burn down the cabin. Murray rode with Bolton and the Rio Kid, and Dora Murray drove the team.

By dark, the Rio Kid had all the new ranchers safely at the Square V Ranch. Shorty rode in from Stirling with the doctor about that time. The Rio Kid went into Vale's room, where the still unconscious man was lying. Edith Thorpe sat quietly beside him. She had been watching over him all through the afternoon.

By the light of a lamp, the physician examined the awful wound in Vale's side.

"Bullet's lodged under his heart," he said at last. "I'll probe for it. Might as well do it now, while he's unconscious."

The Rio Kid assisted. Edith Thorpe's face was pale, but she kept tight hold of herself. When it was over, and the big lead slug extracted—it had flattened itself against a rib, which had deflected it from the heart—the doctor drew Pryor aside.

"If he's watched carefully, he may recover. It's a bad wound, though. He's young and strong, and that's half the battle."

When the Rio Kid went back into the sickroom, Vale was moaning faintly, jerking his head on the pillow. Edith Thorpe was soothing him, talking to him, her voice gentle.

"Dear, you can't die!" the Rio Kid heard her whisper. "Please don't, for my sake."

Pryor had come silently, not wanting to disturb Vale, and he stood there, watching the pretty girl he loved unburden her heart.

"She's made her choice," he mused, "and it ain't me."

The girl was crying softly, her back to the strong young man at the door.

And it was in that moment of silence that a gunshot cracked in the night, and a panther howl floated back on the wind. The Rio Kid jumped into the hall. One of his sentries had called the alarm.

CHAPTER XII

Attack

LOADED carbine in hand and Colt belted high, the Rio Kid ran out into the yard. The alarm had come from the north, and he peered at the wall of blackness that way.

Someone was coming back, firing now and again. It was Wyatt Earp, his tall figure looming in the darkness.

"Hi, Rio Kid! I think it's Kedwin and Zaldini. Half a dozen of 'em run on my guns when they tried to ride by on the trail here. I downed one and winged another and they turned and run for it."

"Advance guard, I reckon," said Pryor. "Kedwin's found out that the cabins are deserted, and he's guessed where they run to."

"Put out them lights in the house. The moon'll be up soon and it'll be good shootin'."

"Bueno."

A first-class strategist, the Rio Kid had all his arrangements made to receive Kedwin and Zaldini. He had guards at several points around the ranch, and armed men ready to rush into action. Murray was in charge of the settlers.

About fifteen fighters all told could be mustered, counting the Rio Kid's companions and Vale's punchers. Some of the women could load guns and assist if it came to that. The doctor had left, shortly before the alarm; he had taken another route, back to Stirling, and Pryor did not think he would be stopped.

He saw to it that all lights were extinguished. Edith Thorpe would not leave Johnny Vale's side but sat there in the darkness to watch over him. Earp, Mireles and the Rio Kid stole up the side of the trail from the north. As yet, all seemed quiet.

For ten minutes, at the crest of the little

domed hill just north of the Square V, the trio waited. Behind them, they could make out the black shape of the house against the star-studded sky. On the horizon, a silver glow touched the line, for the moon was coming up.

Crouched low, covered from the open trail, they waited, ears alert, straining their eyes into the darkness of the dip beyond.

An owl hooted. The mountains began to stand out, with the moon coming up behind them. The breeze was cool, rustling the leaves of shrubs and trees. Several times they thought they caught the sounds of stealthy approach but these were false alarms.

Then the Rio Kid touched Wyatt's shoulder.

"Here they come."

Two riders loomed on the crest. They had come so quietly, with their horses moving at a walk and the hoofs dulled by the softness of the road that the trio had little warning.

"Halt!" ordered the Rio Kid.

The answer was a burst of fire, a shotgun roaring both barrels toward the sound of his voice. Scattering buckshot smashed against his rock cover or whistled in the air near him. The blue-red flames of the burning powder lighted the bodies of the shooting men as targets for a moment, shapeless bulks atop the startled mustangs. The horsemen seemed to have no heads or at least not the usual kind, but square affairs as wide as their shoulders. Slanted slits indicated eyes and in the night they were terrifying.

But the Rio Kid and his companions did not scare easily.

"They're wearin' flour sacks," thought Pryor, and his carbine snapped angrily.

It was at once plain that they were human. A screech of agony rang out, and then Wyatt Earp and Mireles let go. The horses, one of them burned by a bullet, reared and shied.

Cursing calls, close at hand, sent the Rio Kid hurtling back toward the house.

"They're circlin' around where you shot from, Wyatt! We better draw in."

On the main trail from the north, knowing they were discovered, bunches of riders masked by flour sacks drove their spurs into their mounts, charging the Square V.

Pryor's men had headed for the ranchhouse, too, when his signal brought the sentries close. The moon showed over the sharp-peaked mountain, and a faint silver glow came over the world. Shadows deepened, but the clear spaces could be made out by the watching marksmen.

Small bunches of horsemen, with shapeless forms, broke from the manzanita thickets and from the spruce and pine clumps on the hills.

"Swing them lines around!" a mighty voice bellowed.

"Zaldini," said the Rio Kid.

The racing horsemen cut down on both sides of them. With the new gunnies Kedwin had imported he now had around fifty men—professional killers, expert with firearms, hardened to bloodshed, the riff-raff of the mining camps, road-agents, thieves and other hired guns. The Rio Kid drew his force inside, behind the protective thick logs of the house. Narrow windows there made excellent loop-holes, and the armed settlers and gunfighters were set at various points.

"Hold it till I give the order," the Rio Kid said, to those in the darkened rooms.

IT WAS black in there, with only lighter patches indicating windows, but unseeing, he could sense the steady courage of his men. He went over to the front door, which he opened a crack, squatting at the side.

The defenders were outnumbered three to one, yet they had the fortresslike log walls of the ranchhouse to aid them in their defense.

"Kedwin's killers are wearin' the flour sacks which mask their upper bodies," thought the Rio Kid. "They're mighty shore of us, or they'd never show 'em that way."

What Bolton had figured out must be correct. Kedwin had had men acting as Black Barts all through the Sierras.

"Fire!"

Outside, the command was given in a harsh, imperative voice which Pryor was sure belonged to Fred Kedwin. Zaldini, Lownes and others picked it up. Rifles and Colts flared in the night. A hail of slugs rapped into the foot-thick spruce and pine logs of Vale's house.

"Keep down, boys, and keep cool heads," called the Rio Kid, in the lull.

He was watching the shapes of the riders in the yard. There were more on the sides of the house, where Earp, Mireles and Shorty were posted to keep him apprised of the enemy movements. None of the bullets, save those which came high through windows, entered the house. No one was hit.

Squatted at the side of the open door, the Rio Kid waited. Kedwin had pulled up and his men sat facing the ranch.

"Rio Kid, are you in there?" shouted a stentorian voice.

Jim Bridger, famous Indian-fighting scout, teams up with the Rio Kid in WAGONS TO CALIFORNIA, next issue's exciting complete Bob Pryor novel by TOM CURRY—packed with action!

"Here I am! That you, Kedwin?"

"Yes!" the voice replied. "Throw out your guns and come out with your hands raised, all of you. I'll promise to see nobody's hurt if you surrender to me."

"Why should we do that?" Pryor wished to see what Kedwin had to say.

"Because I order it," called Kedwin curtly. He seemed sure that he was master of the situation. "I don't want to hurt anyone, but I mean to protect my men. You killed one today and fired on others, and all your friends are in it with you, Rio Kid. We're only here in self-defense."

The cold-blooded nerve of Kedwin's assertions brought an amazed laugh to the Rio Kid's lips. And yet, as he rapidly thought it over, Pryor realized that Kedwin might even make such towering lies stick, in case the law came in. He had more men than the Rio Kid, men willing to swear to any untruth. Kedwin might say that the Square V and the Rio Kid had begun the feud, and they had only their own words against Kedwin's. In such a land, with few organized courts, anything could happen.

"What yuh mean to do with us, in case we give up, Kedwin?" he called.

"I only want to disarm you, so my men will be safe. And I want you and the men who killed my boys. I'll turn you over to the sheriff at Stirling for trial."

"Well, dang my hide," thought Pryor. Aloud he called, "Sorry, Kedwin, but we don't aim to oblige yuh! And if yuh come any closer with that pack of howlin' hydrophoby wolves, we'll shoot to kill!"

He could make out the bunch of men, from among whom Fred Kedwin spoke. The fellow took care that he was shielded by riders, in case of lead flying his way.

"Then the consequences are on your head, Rio Kid!" bellowed Kedwin. "Bring 'em out, boys!"

Instantly guns began exploding from every side, and Kedwin's masked gunnies drove in. The shock of the attack was stunning. Kedwin's fierce fighters, howling and shooting, rode up to the walls of the ranchhouse. Lead rapped the logs and came through the windows. "Let 'em have it, boys, fire!" roared the Rio Kid.

He bobbed out from the thick, upright pine log which supported the doorway arch. His heavy Colt flared in the night. From the windows and other openings about the room, the men behind him opened fire, and the cool deadliness of their aim struck the gunnies full in the face, at close range.

Howls of fury, and the shriek of a mortally-wounded horse rose over the din of the battle. The Rio Kid was shooting full speed, changing over to a second revolver as his first was emptied. Three riders in the shapeless sacks, eyes gleaming through the slits, leaped from their saddles to the porch, shooting as they came. He hit the leader, and the second one felt the burn of his lead. They threw themselves off the low veranda, ducking from his sight. He could hear them swearing.

THE charge halted a few yards away, then the attackers turned, unable to face the concentrated lead of the defenders. Wounded gunnies swore as they held punctured arms or sought to staunch bleeding of torn flesh.

"They won't charge thataway ag'in!" the Rio Kid thought grimly, dusting them with his Colts.

The enemy drew off, and Kedwin evidently was consulting with his lieutenants. Watching, the Rio Kid could see riders on the slope, against the sky. The moon was well up, and the world outside no longer black.

When he was certain that they had had enough of direct attack, the Rio Kid found Wyatt Earp and Murray.

"They're throwin' a circle around the place, I believe," reported Wyatt.

"Yeah. Kedwin'll try to hold us in, I reckon." The Rio Kid rolled himself a quirly and lighted up for a smoke.

"Huh," grunted Earp. "That well's a long ways from the back door. Mebbe we can snake out to it when it's dark, though. However, Kedwin'll think of that, too."

"Chin Lee has some big barrels of water," said Pryor. "I had him draw all he could this afternoon. We can hold out a while, even if we do go hungry. Vale ain't got much on hand to last such a passel of folks for long."

"I'll go for help," a quiet voice said, close to Pryor.

"Why, Perfessor! How'd *you* survive the scrap?"

Charles Bolton stood near the Rio Kid. In a shaft of moonlight, Pryor could see his spectacled face.

"Very well, thanks. I'm not much of a hand with firearms but I used a revolver Mr. Murray lent me. I'll volunteer to bring help against those devils." Bolton was angry.

"But, Perfessor," objected the Rio Kid, "you couldn't snake a hoss through that circle, not in the moonlight anyhow. I doubt if Wyatt or any experienced scout could, let alone a man like you."

"I won't need a horse. I'll go afoot."

"With yore lame leg?" said Earp. "Stirlin's too far, Perfessor."

The Rio Kid slapped Bolton on the back. "Thanks for offerin', Perfessor. Yuh got plenty nerve."

"Perhaps you're right," Bolton said ruefully "I guess I couldn't walk that far." His voice was low, regretful.

"We'll sit tight till daylight," said the Rio Kid, "and see what Kedwin does next. Set some sentries, Wyatt, and let's have a shut-eye session. I'm plumb wore out."

With guards posted, the garrison, the women and the children slept.

WYATT EARP

WYATT EARP, one of the most famous of Western marshals, was born in Illinois, on March 19, 1848.

When he was barely sixteen, he took charge of the Earp wagons and stock during his family's journey westward. He was six feet tall, wiry and strong, and became an expert teamster and stage driver.

Turning to buffalo hunting, he became famous for his daring, courage and marksmanship. Later he was a town marshal in Kansas, and a federal marshal in Tombstone, Arizona. He was a great gunfighter, but gave everybody a fair chance. He did not drink, had no bad habits.

Wyatt Earp lived to be 81, passing away January 13, 1929, a man respected by everyone as a lawman and scout, one of the true builders of the West.

CHAPTER XIII

The Siege

DAWN was near when the Rio Kid came awake. Kedwin and his gunnies had a circle of death drawn about the house, enclosing all his foes within the Square V. Pryor looked out a window. He could see dismounted men, Zaldini's rustlers and the new gang which had come in. Smoke from several fires showed that they were cooking breakfast.

"They fetched in a couple of cows when it was light," explained Wyatt Earp, who had been up before the Rio Kid. "None of 'em come within gunshot."

After Chin Lee had given him coffee and food, the Rio Kid went to see how Johnny Vale was doing. Edith Thorpe was watching over the injured rancher. His eyes were closed and his face was pale, drawn.

The girl tiptoed out, drawing the Rio Kid with her.

"How is he?" asked Pryor.

She shook her head. "He regained consciousness for a while, Rio Kid," replied Edith. "But he's terribly weak." Looking into Bob Pryor's eyes, she had to keep back her tears of anxiety about Vale. "I'm afraid he's dying. His pulse is so weak I can scarcely feel it beat. I wish the doctor would come."

"The doctor! Kedwin won't let anybody, not even the sawbones, come through. If he tries to make it, they'll tie him up and hold him."

"Those awful gunmen! Johnny needs medicine and expert care—quiet, as well. The shooting upset him so. He moaned and tossed all through it and tried to get up."

Pryor pressed her hand, which trembled a little. She had chosen Johnny Vale, and he could not help feeling the blow of having lost her. Such a girl was worth a man's existence, worth dying for—but Vale could not die, for she loved him.

"I'll go through and fetch help," he told her. "We'll drive Kedwin off and bring in what Vale needs, Edith."

"Thank you, Rio Kid. You—you're a wonderful man."

"I'll have to wait till dark. There's no gettin' through in the daylight, Edith. But I'll start tonight."

The gunnies under Kedwin and Zaldini held off. The day was fairly quiet, only a few long shots coming in at the house. Restless children, confined indoors, played underfoot. When the dark finally fell over the Sierras, the Rio Kid drew Wyatt Earp aside.

"Wyatt," he said, "I'm goin' out and bring back help. Vale's weakenin' and must have medicine and the sawbones. And then, we can't sit here forever. There ain't much food left."

"Yuh'll never make it," said Earp.

"I'll have to try. The moon won't be up for an hour and yuh can make a diversion for me on the north while I duck out by the south trail."

"You goin' to walk? It's a mighty long run to Stirlin'."

"No, I'm ridin' Saber."

"Huh! They're coverin' our corrals."

"He's loose. He'll come to me when I whistle." The Rio Kid added, "You take charge here, Wyatt. I don't believe them lobos have the stomach for another attack like last night, but if they do yuh kin beat 'em off. After all, I'm only one gun."

"Yuh're worth fifty, Rio Kid. But good luck to yuh." Earp pressed Pryor's hand.

"I go, General?" Mireles who hovered close at hand, asked anxiously.

"No, Celestino. You stick here."

The Mexican's face fell. His dark eyes followed Bob Pryor as the Rio Kid made ready for his desperate sortie.

Earp and Mireles went to the north side of the ranchhouse, threw up a window. Wyatt squeezed through, with Mireles covering him. Earp ran out into the dark yard, and opened fire, his Colts blaring in the night.

The Rio Kid was at the south kitchen window. He heard the response of Kedwin's sentries, and shouts to the main gang. Spurs off and moccasins on his feet, and with his face blacked with cork, the Rio Kid slid from the window and hit the cooling earth in the shadows.

He heard the hubbub at the other side of the building, and thudding footsteps as Kedwin's gang rushed to the danger point. Getting up, he dashed full-tilt for the stable's bulk. A man swore and a rifle clicked to full cock.

"Hey, who's that? Halt!"

The Rio Kid let go with his Colt at the vague shadow menacing him, firing at the sound. The carbine flared, but it slanted too high, and a shriek of pain joined the explosions. Then Pryor was behind the stable, and the shrill lilt of a Civil War tune came from his puckered lips:

Said the big black charger to the little white mare,
The sergeant says yore feed bill really ain't fair.

He kept running. Several of Kedwin's tough gunnies were swerving over to see what the new commotion was, and the fellow the Rio Kid had wounded was shouting a warning.

BUT the moon was not up and Bob Pryor was a dodging shadow in the night. Still, he had to keep whistling, so the dun would find him. Saber could not be far off, unless he had been shot down. He was wary, however, and would not go near strangers.

Some of the besiegers were mounted, as roving guards about the Square V. Pryor heard rapping hoofs, but was not certain whether they were made by the mounts of friend or enemy until the dun galloped to him, nuzzling his hand.

Two riders were coming around the barn, and the Rio Kid's breath was rasping, for he had run at full-tilt ever since he had left the house. He hit leather without touching iron, and his strong legs clinched about Saber's ribs. One of the pursuers fired at him and he heard the whine of a slug past his ear. Bent low over the powerful, swift dun, he turned and sent a reply.

"The Rio Kid!" howled the man in the lead, seeing his face in the pistol's flash. "Zaldini! Kedwin! This way!"

Pryor cut to the right, remembering that there was a path which led finally to the Stirling road, and the dun was skilled at running in the dark, picking a way. The hills loomed black, the undergrowth a mass of threatening mystery. A horseman was tearing in on him, from the right. He heard a cry of triumph, the order to halt. He swung, emptying his Colt in that direction, then he was past the second circle that had been drawn up around the Square V.

Urgency drove the Rio Kid on. Vale must be saved, and Kedwin driven back. A slip, an extra determined charge in the night, might overwhelm the little garrison. Every black patch before him was a potential death-trap, and he kept low, peering ahead, trusting to Saber's sure-footed gallop to get through.

The thrill of danger was in his heart. He was never as satisfied as when in peril. It was meat and drink to the Rio Kid. The war had done that to him and now normal existence was too tame for his blood. He required danger, and hunted it as he rode the wild Frontier.

"It's just as well she chose Vale," he mused, his thoughts reverting to Edith Thorpe. "She'd be worried about me all the time, I s'pose, and a bullet *will* catch up with me one of these days." Not many men who took the danger road lived to be old or even middle-aged.

The dun was swift. They shook off any pursuit, and reached the rocky road which ran down to Stirling, nestling in its valley. He could see the town from the heights long before he reached it. By the time he pulled up, with Saber mud-spattered and breathing hard, it was late and most of the homes were dark. Stores were closed but the several saloons were open. Leaving the dun at a side hitch-rack, the Rio Kid entered the Stirling Inn, wiping the black from his face.

It was a good-sized place, with rooms to rent upstairs, and a big bar on the lower story. There were mirrors behind the bar, and sawdust on the floor. Miners and cowboys stood at the bar, drinking, their booted feet on rail. They kept to their own groups, for neither loved the other.

Set off in a semi-circular alcove were a number of tables. Women sat here, with their men, and the banging of a tinny piano competed with the buzz of voices.

The Rio Kid was thirsty. He pushed in to the bar and had a drink.

"Have you seen the sheriff this evenin'?" he asked, as the barkeeper served him.

"He was in a while ago but he done went off somewheres. You might find him in another saloon."

"*Bueno.*" The Rio Kid tossed down his drink, and turned. He wasn't acquainted in Stirling. "Wonder where Hume is," he thought. "Chasin' Black Bart all over the Sierras still, I reckon."

He went outside, pausing on the low porch, looking up and down, planning his course.

The town's doctor was across the way, and he went to the house. It was dark, but he knocked on the door. After a time, a window opened.

"What is it?" a woman asked. "The doctor's not here."

"Where's he gone?" asked Pryor.

"He rode to the Square V this afternoon to see a patient. He ought to be back soon."

The Rio Kid left. He didn't want to alarm the physician's wife, but he guessed that Kedwin's men must have caught the doctor and they would make sure he didn't get back to town in time to be of any help to the besieged.

Hunting the sheriff, the Rio Kid started the rounds of the saloons, looking in at each. He visited the four that were open but saw nobody he knew. He was planning what his moves should be, to get enough fighters together to crush Kedwin, as he walked back on the board sidewalk toward the Stirling Inn.

A carriage drew up at the curb, in front of the Inn, and a big man got out, followed by three others. The Rio Kid hurried his pace, for he recognized George Hearst. Hearst went into the Inn with his engineers at his heels. The Rio Kid swung up behind him and stepped into the lighted, big room crowded with men.

"Reach, cuss yuh!"

THE Rio Kid, intent on Hearst, had walked into it. Zaldini faced him, six feet away, and on either side of him he saw two of the big man's followers dropping their hands to their Colts.

Senator Hearst stopped, turning, his eyes startled. He blocked off the gunny on the Rio Kid's left. The man on the right was a breath slow in drawing, but Zaldini had his Colt up.

However, instead of shooting instantly, the big rustler spoke, his words intended as an explanation to throw off those witnesses watching the sudden fight.

"Outlaw!" he crowed. "Yuh're under arrest!"

The Rio Kid was already in action. He knew what to do without hesitating, and fell to the side, his left hand breaking his fall. At the same time his right hand whipped out his pistol with the speed of legerdemain. Zaldini's Colt roared, echoing sharply in the confined space. The slug missed the dropping Rio Kid. And a breath later Pryor's bullet smacked into Zaldini's forehead.

The shout of the gunny on the right turned to a squeak as he saw his big boss go down like a pole-axed steer. Instead of keeping on with his draw, he turned and dived over the end of the bar, scurrying past the bartenders to the back exit. The gunman on Pryor's left lost his enthusiasm, too, as Hearst shifted and the Rio Kid's gun swung. The fellow dropped his pistol, raised his hands, and cried for mercy.

Now that he had time to think it over, the Rio Kid realized that Zaldini must have come straight to Stirling after him, guessing that was where the escaped Pryor would head. He had found Saber at the rack, and had just come inside when the Rio Kid appeared.

The heavy body had collapsed, thudding to the sawdust. Checking, the Rio Kid took away the gunny's weapons, ordered him into a corner.

"Rio Kid!" exclaimed Hearst. "That was a beautiful shot. But what goes on?"

"Trouble, Senator. Johnny Vale's near death. He was drygulched by this Zaldini rustler here, and now all the folks in the hills are besieged at Vale's by Kedwin and Zaldini's men."

"Kedwin? You mean Fred Kedwin?"

"That's the one."

"I know him, though not well. A sharp operator. He was in some trouble last year but managed to wriggle out of it. He came here to see me the day after I arrived, as a matter of fact."

"He's a bad hombre, Senator, and a tough one. If I ever see him in my gunsights I'll

pull trigger and talk afterwards."

A tall man with a sandy mustache, in range clothing, burst into the Stirling Inn. He had a five-pointed star pinned to his vest.

"What's goin' on?" he cried, and then he saw Zaldini, limp in the sawdust. "Who shot that man?"

"I did," said the Rio Kid. "He had it comin' to him, Sheriff."

"You come with me!" barked the sheriff. "I want yore guns."

"That dead one said that feller is outlaw," called a barkeeper.

"That's a lie," said Pryor, facing the sheriff. He had met a couple of the officer's deputies, with Hume. "J. B. Hume will vouch for me."

"You come with me. I ain't takin' no chances."

"But—"

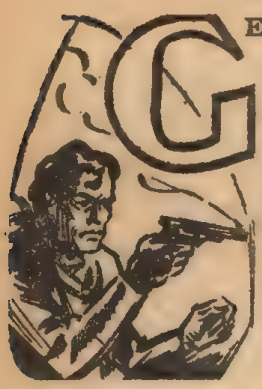
The scowling sheriff advanced on the Rio Kid.

"Sheriff Ince," George Hearst said, "I'll vouch for the Rio Kid. He's a friend of mine."

Ince checked himself, and nodded. "All right, Senator. But I'll have to check up."

CHAPTER XIV

Official Aid



GEORGE HEARST turned, to stare down at Zaldini. The sheriff got hold of the dead rustler's shoulders, shifting him. Zaldini's coat fell aside, and Hearst stooped with a quick exclamation. He took something from Zaldini's vest pocket.

"What's that?" asked Pryor.

"My watch and chain!" exclaimed the surprised and elated Senator Hearst. "The one Black Bart robbed me of when I was on my way here!"

Hearst was inordinately pleased. He seized the Rio Kid's arm and swung to the bar.

"Set 'em up, for everybody!" he cried.

"Senator, I got no time to drink," the Rio Kid said. "My friends are in desperate need." Quickly he told Hearst of the siege at the Square V. "Kedwin's behind it all," he summed up. "He cheated this Colonel Thorpe, yuh see, then killed him, I reckon, when Thorpe tried to make him give back the money he got for the salted mine. Then his hydraulickin' broke him and he hit no gold to pay him for his trouble. Now he's tryin' to wipe out Vale and the new settlers in the hills north of the Square V. Why, I don't savvy yet. I've got to check him."

Hearst stared into the Rio Kid's face. "You won five thousand dollars when you got back my watch, Rio Kid," he reminded.

Pryor shrugged. "It was a pleasure, Senator. Forget the reward."

"No, I won't. And I think I can help you. Of course, the first thing we've got to do is to collect enough fighting men to drive off Kedwin and his gang. The sheriff will help, and I believe Hume is within a few miles of here now."

Hearst led the Rio Kid aside, after he had spoken to the sheriff. Powerful, well-known, Hearst commanded as he pleased.

"I can help your friends on what Kedwin's after, Rio Kid," he said. "It's what brought me here with my engineers. I—"

He broke off, and a smile touched his bearded lips.

"Why, Governor!" he exclaimed, starting forward to greet the tall man who had just entered. "You're late!" He drew Bob Pryor with him. "This is the Rio Kid. Rio Kid, shake hands with Governor Leland Stanford."

Leland Stanford's grip was powerful, as he smiled and shook Pryor's hand. He was a man of imposing appearance, nearly six feet tall and weighing over two hundred and fifty pounds. He was clad in the height of fashion. Builder and controller of the Central Pacific, which connected with the Union Pacific, first railroad to cross the United States, he was California's great man. He was worth millions, and everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. Even Hearst was not so wealthy as Stanford who had been California's Governor during the Civil War, and had held the state for the Union.

"I heard you had come down, George," he said to Hearst. "How does it look?"

"Splendid, Governor. Suppose we sit down and talk it over?"

The Rio Kid was pressed by the urgency of his friends' need. He touched Hearst's arm.

"I'll be ridin' with the sheriff, Senator," he said. "Thanks a mighty and I'll see yuh later."

"Good, good."

The Rio Kid hurried out, to help Sheriff Ince organize his posse. There were men to be had, and Ince routed them out, checking their arms. Hearst's indorsement of Pryor had short-cut the task for him of making himself known in a strange town and getting what he needed to save the Square V.

Thirty riders armed with shotguns and Colts swung into the road behind the Rio Kid and Sheriff Al Ince as they took the trail to the Square V.

The faster riders had to adjust the pace to the slower. Also it had taken time to dispose of Zaldini, collect a large enough posse to go against Kedwin's gunnies, and make the return trip, so it was dawn before the Rio Kid brought reinforcements to the defenders of Vale's ranch.

A gray mist rolled over the river and along the little feeder brooks running into the stream. The sun was still behind the distant

east range of hills. Pryor led the way, a Colt in one hand. Kedwin would have sentinels on the trails but the Rio Kid meant to smash through and bring battle to Kedwin, if the man would fight.

Half a mile from the Square V, the Rio Kid pushed the dun around a turn in the road. A bullet whirled past his hat and as the hidden killer shouted, the Rio Kid's revolver banged its reply. There was a thicket of thorned bushes on his left, from whence the shot had come and he fired into it blind.

INCE, at Saber's heels, opened up with his big Colt, and the whole posse slowed, but the drygulcher was crashing through the thickets. He kept firing, and the Rio Kid heard shots farther along, repeating the warning.

"Come on, Sheriff!" he cried. "They savvy we're comin' now!"

They sped on. Kedwin's guards were drawing in, and the posse was not fired upon from the sides of the trail again as they rode on to the heights overlooking the Square V. The siege was lifted already. Kedwin, aware of the posse's approach, had drawn his gang off to the north. There they sat their horses, with shotguns, carbines and pistols ready, watching the Rio Kid lead his bunch into the valley.

"Let's go at 'em, Sheriff!" cried the Rio Kid.

"Get ready, boys—charge!" ordered Ince.

Guns cocked, the possemen swung left, down the slope for a time, heading toward Kedwin, who sat among his gang, coolly regarding them. The hill dipped down, then a new height rose and on this Kedwin had taken his stand. He had more men than the Rio Kid, and when the posse came within range, Kedwin gave the command and the gunnies opened fire.

Bullets whirled about the lawmen. A couple of horses were hit, a man was burned in the calf of his leg by a slug. The posse sent several volleys at the enemy, then Kedwin turned his men and retreated northward toward his stronghold, refusing full battle.

"Dog him, he won't fight!" growled Pryor to Ince. "Our hosses are plumb wore out, too, and theirs are fresh!"

This became apparent after a mile run. Kedwin and his men were able to stay out in front. Aim was difficult with a mustang jogging under a man, and most of Ince's posse fell behind, their mounts done in by the swift run from Stirling.

The Rio Kid drew up, staring regretfully after Kedwin.

"We'll have to rest our hosses, Sheriff, before we can go after them skunks," he said ruefully. "They can hold us off at their mountain stronghold and they outnumber us."

They turned their lathered, mud-splashed mounts back to the Square V.

Wyatt Earp, Celestino Mireles, Professor Bolton, Murray and the rest were in the yard. They waved their hats, and called to the Rio Kid, who had got through to lift the siege. One of Ince's men, whose horse had gone lame, came in, and at his side walked the doctor from Stirling. He had been a captive but had not been hurt. Kedwin's men had held him, tied up, and Ince's men had freed him.

The doctor looked Johnny Vale over and thought the young rancher was better. His youth and the quick help given him by the Rio Kid and Bolton had given Johnny a chance to pull through. After leaving medicine and orders for the patient, the doctor borrowed a Square V horse and hurried back to town. He carried a note from the Rio Kid to George Hearst.

Pryor had to rest, eat, clean up. The dun had run all night and he, too, needed food and time to recuperate before going after Kedwin again. Kedwin must have been surprised to see him, for evidently he had counted on Zaldini stopping the Rio Kid or catching him in Stirling. There had been nothing he could do but run for the mountains when the posse had appeared.

"We'll have to trap 'em, and pronto," thought Pryor, as he drifted off to sleep in the room across from Vale's, "and clean this up!"

Kedwin hung over them all, a constant menace to their lives. . . .

It was noon when the Rio Kid awoke, refreshed by his nap. In the war he had acquired the habit of falling asleep whenever he desired to, of getting along on a few hours if need be.

He went to the kitchen lean-to, to ask Chin Lee for some hot coffee and food, for he felt starved. The Chinese was not in the kitchen, but a big coffee pot stood on the back of the stove, and the Rio Kid helped himself.

From the window, he glanced out and saw the scrawny cook squatting near the woodpile. Chin Lee was laboriously splitting some slabs of pine with a knife and a hammer, and his thin lips worked, no doubt uttering the Chinese equivalents of American profanity.

The Rio Kid grinned, and when he had finished his coffee, he strolled out.

"What's wrong, Chin? Ain't yuh got an ax?"

"Ax walk away," snapped Chin Lee. "Somebody stealum. How I cut wood? Must have."

He had to keep his big stove stoked, for cooking purposes, for warmth. It took the chill off the house, and Vale needed that, as well as the children and women collected there.

"So somebody took yore ax. I s'pose it was Kedwin's hombres. They'd steal anything they could lay their hands on."

HE HELPED Chin Lee split some wood and get it in. Murray and the other men were in the sunshine now, after having

helped clean up the mess around the ranch. The women were ready to give Chin Lee a hand although the old Chinese bridled if anyone tried to interfere with his province, the kitchen. He was capable of cooking for any number of people, he thought.

Saddling up, with Mireles and Wyatt Earp as companions, the Rio Kid headed north from the Square V. He wanted to make sure that Kedwin and his gang were not sneaking back. He was laying his plans to clean them up. Sheriff Ince and his posse, camped in the field behind the ranch, were still resting from their night ride, and awaiting orders.

The ranch was crowded. The scheme of life had been disrupted by Kedwin's machinations. Now the Rio Kid, from talking with George Hearst, had an idea of what Kedwin was up to. He kept it to himself, however, turning over in his mind how to take his enemy.

"Why, there's the Perfessor!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yeah?" said Earp. "I ain't seen him all mornin'. The ranch is so all-fired crowded yuh can't keep track of yoreself."

They had just ridden around a rock spur, headed north. Professor Bolton, on foot, had emerged from some pine woods to the left and was walking rapidly down the path for the Square V.

He sighted the trio, and stopped. He seemed inclined to turn and run but then he recognized the Rio Kid and waved to him, limping toward them as Pryor and his trail-mates rode on.

"Good afternoon, Rio Kid!" cried Bolton. His face was red from exertion and he beamed at them. "I've been exercising, cutting dead trees from the pine woods. Wonderful, very stimulating."

"Oh, yeah. I see you got Chin Lee's ax. He's been huntin' it. We figgered Kedwin's men must've took it."

"No, I borrowed it. The ranch was so noisy, I thought I would come out alone and get some fresh air. We were cooped up all the time the gunmen were around."

"Well, we'll see yuh later, Perfessor. Chin Lee'll be glad of any wood yuh got cut. Ask Murray to send out a wagon and fetch it in. A lot more's needed, with all them folks to feed and keep warm, and the trees close to the house have been cut down!"

"Where are you bound now?" asked Bolton, leaning on the ax.

"We're checkin' up on Kedwin, that's all. Be back pronto."

Bolton nodded. He limped off toward the Square V. They could see the house behind them, and the thin column of smoke issuing from the chimney.

"A queer duck, ain't he, the Perfessor?" observed Earp, as they rode on. "Such a mild little hombre."

"Yeah, Wyatt. And he was all-fired interested in Black Bart. Imagine if the Perfessor ever met that road-agent face to face!"

There was no sign of Kedwin near the Square V. What he might be planning, the Rio Kid couldn't say. But he knew that Kedwin was desperate, would never give up until he was dead.

CHAPTER XV

Hold-up

KEEPING busy with his plans, the Rio Kid sent Earp and Mireles and two of Ince's deputies off, to spy at a distance on Kedwin's mountain stronghold. A messenger came back, to tell him that the enemy was there, dug in behind their rock-and tree-trunk barricades.

"Take an army to get 'em out," Bob Pryor thought.

Night was approaching. He had not heard yet from George Hearst. But as the darkness fell, a man rode into the Square V and hunted out the Rio Kid.

"Why, Hume!" he exclaimed. "What you doin' here?"

Pounds had faded off the tall Wells-Fargo detective in his long search for Black Bart, the Terror of the Sierra. Hume was a bulldog in determination. He kept plugging at his task, which was to bring to book the outlaw who for so long had stolen the company's strong-boxes. Every slightest clue was run down by Hume.

"Black Bart held up the stage from Stirling to Yreka, early this mornin', Rio Kid," he said. "He got four thousand in cash and gold from our box."

"Shucks," said Earp. "Hume, all of Kedwin's hombres, includin' Zaldini and prob'ly Kedwin hisself have been usin' that Black Bart disguise to fetch off holdups."

Professor Charles Bolton, who had been reading near at hand, shut his book when he heard of Black Bart, and joined them.

"What is it?" he asked.

The Rio Kid told him. Bolton smiled, shaking his head.

"Hume, you have been runnin' about in circles after Black Bart. I'll wager you anything you wish that he's two hundred miles from here, laughing at you. Don't you know that all of Zaldini's gang and Kedwin's men, too, have used Black Bart's disguise to trick their victims? It's been proved. The Rio Kid will back me up on that. Of course, these latest holdups have been crude. They lack the technique of the real Black Bart. And Black Bart never killed anybody. Zaldini and Kedwin have done that."

Hume stared at the frail teacher. "I think

you may be right, Bolton. I've heard of the flour sack masks Kedwin's gunnies used. Just the same, I'm convinced the real Black Bart committed that holdup this mornin'."

"How?" demanded Bolton.

Hume shrugged. "I had my doubts about the others. But as you say, Black Bart has a regular technique. This time it was his. For instance, there were no horse tracks leading from the cleverly-chosen spot where the holdup occurred. The box was smashed open, and sacks of gold and bundles of currency were taken out but nothing was stolen from passengers."

"You mean Black Bart worked afoot?" inquired Pryor.

The Wells-Fargo man shook his head.

"I picked up some fresh hoofprints about a quarter of a mile from the scene of the crime. Black Bart ran to that point with his loot, and picked up his horse there. He rode for some miles, in a southeasterly direction, then left the horse, which wandered off and stopped. I found the animal. It has a DD brand on it. But Black Bart has evaporated into thin air."

Hume had come in to eat, and to rest for the night. Trailing in darkness was impossible. Even in broad daylight, the elusive Black Bart could not be tracked.

Later, Hume and the Rio Kid spoke together.

"I've got to come up with Black Bart," said Hume. "Rio Kid, perhaps you'll help me. You're the best tracker I ever knew."

"I'm no magician, though," the Rio Kid said, with a shrug, "and Black Bart seems to be. I tried trailin' him before, when he held up the stage Thorpe and Kedwin were on. If he used a horse it'd be easier, but a man afoot is able to hide his sign if he savvies the game. Black Bart don't leave clues."

"He left one where he smashed the express box today," said Hume.

"What was that?"

Hume held out a small, roughly triangular-shaped bit of metal. By the light of a nearby hanging lantern, the Rio Kid examined it curiously. It was perhaps half an inch wide at the base and tapered to a point. One side was unfinished and rough.

"Looks like it broke off from a bigger chunk of steel," observed Pryor.

Wyatt Earp strolled up. "Here's a messenger from Stirlin'," said Earp. "He's fetched a note for you from Hearst, Rio Kid."

Black Bart faded from Pryor's mind. He must trap Fred Kedwin and the gang before they did any more damage. He opened Hearst's note, and read it in the lantern-light.

"*Bueno*," he murmured. "That ought to draw Kedwin!"

PICKETS out, he slept through the night. He was up with the dawn, and went to get some coffee and breakfast from Chin Lee. The Chinese cook was in the yard, cutting wood to fill the rapacious maw of the big stove. The Rio Kid joined him.

"Yuh got back yore axe, eh, Chin Lee? The Perfessor was cuttin' trees down with it yestidday."

"Uh," grunted Chin Lee. "Perfessor like flea, never stay put."

"Good morning, Rio Kid. Good morning, Chin Lee."

Pryor turned. Bolton was beaming at them through his thick glasses.

"I regret it, but today must be my last at the Square V. Duty calls and I must return to my work at the school. I've had a marvelous vacation, though. The mountain air is so bracing."

"Yuh're leavin' us, Perfessor?"

Charles Bolton nodded. "I wish I could stay and help you in your fight against Kedwin. But now that it's all cleared up that Kedwin and his men have been posing as Black Bart and did those killings and holdups in the Black Bart disguise, you'll hardly need me. I'm not much of a hand in a gunfight, you know."

The Rio Kid nodded. Chin Lee, evidently sulking because Bolton had borrowed his axe, raised the tool and brought it down viciously on the top of a thick log. A chunk flew off and struck Bolton in the shin. Bolton gave an exclamation, stooping to rub his leg.

Pryor stared at the axe, as Chin Lee dropped it to gather up his wood.

"Well," he said, "let's go get some coffee, Perfessor."

J. B. Hume, whom he found a few minutes later just waking up in the barn, gave the Rio Kid the little chunk of metal, which he had found at the spot where Black Bart had smashed open the Wells-Fargo box the previous morning.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"I ain't dead shore yet, but it'll jolt yuh if it's so!" The Rio Kid grinned. "Come on, Hume."

They hurried to the woodpile. The Rio Kid seized Chin Lee's old axe, and tried the chunk of steel in the top corner, which was freshly broken off.

"It fits!" gasped Hume, his eyes wild. "Exactly!" His fingers vised on the Rio Kid's arm. "Tell me, what does this mean? That's the axe Black Bart used to smash open the box yesterday!"

"Yeah, and when yuh hear who had it, yuh'll faint dead away!" chuckled the Rio Kid. "Black Bart, the Terror of the Sierra!"

His mirth grew. The irony of it struck him as one of the funniest of strange events which had occurred during his adventuresome life.

"Why?" panted Hume. "Who is he? How's this come to be here? This is no joke, Rio Kid!"

"Black Bart is—"

A hoarse, hollow voice, deep in timbre, startled the two.

"Reach!" it said.

It came from behind them, from the wood-

shed. Charles Bolton stepped out, facing them steadily, his thin lips set in a straight line, his eyes somber. He had a cocked Colt .45 in his right hand, steady as fate.

"You—Black Bart!" barked Hume.

"Yuh little rascal, Perfessor!" cried the Rio Kid. "Yuh shore fooled us, didn't yuh? That fake limp and all, and yore talk! Why, yuh're the greatest walker in California, ain't yuh? Yuh can walk miles if need be and hide yore sign!"

"Rio Kid, you've brought me to this—Hume and you," Bolton said. "Now, I'll have to kill you both."

"No, you ain't goin' to shoot, Black Bart," said Pryor. "It ain't in yore make-up. Yuh said so yoreself. When Kedwin's gang killed innocent victims, yuh got excited, 'cause it was blamed on you. Yuh even helped me solve the robberies and lay 'em on the rightful bandits, to keep Black Bart's name out of shootin's. You can't kill!"

"Take it easy, Bart," Hume said coolly. "The Rio Kid's right. Holdups are all you're accused of. But if you shoot, one of us will get you and if you're alive, you'll hang."

They were still amazed, hardly able to believe that the mild little pedant they had known could be Black Bart, the mighty road-agent of the mountains who had operated for so many years in northern California.

THE Rio Kid kept talking, to occupy Black Bart.

"Yuh borrowed Chin Lee's ax, before dawn, Perfessor. Yuh'd caught a stray DD horse, left by one of Kedwin's gunnies, and yuh had it in them pine woods. Yuh rode near to the spot where you knowed the Yreka stage always passed, held it up, took the box, busted it open and got back within easy walkin' of the Square V. It was planned mighty clever. I got to credit yuh with that."

"I always planned my jobs carefully," said Black Bart, with deep pride.

"I savvy you did," said Hume earnestly. "I suppose you boarded at ranches or homes near where you intended to do the holdups, Black Bart."

"Yes. And in that way I could check every detail."

"Put down the gun, Perfessor," ordered the Rio Kid.

Black Bart hesitated. He was about twelve feet from them and if he fired, one must die, either Hume or Pryor.

"You won't shoot," declared Hume.

"Dang right he won't!" said a cool voice from behind Black Bart.

It was Wyatt Earp. He had circled the shed and come up back of Bolton, who was absorbed in his play with the Rio Kid and Hume.

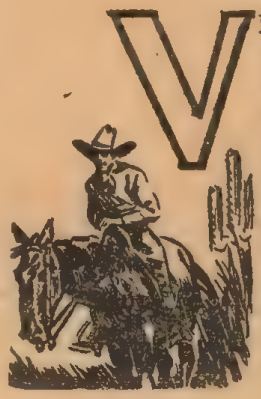
"What's the idea of stickin' a hogleg on my pards, Perfessor?" called Earp, not yet aware of all that had occurred.

The pistol fell from Black Bart's hand and he began to tremble. Tears smarted in his eyes.

"You have me!" he said, his voice unsteady. "Black Bart is done!"

CHAPTER XVI

Appointment



VERDANTLY the cloak of spring covered the Sierras and in the lush valley the season was well along. The sun was warm as a big wagon bumped and creaked over the rocky trail from Stirling, and drew up at the foot of the hill where Kedwin's hydraulic mine had gouged a livid gash in the mountain's breast.

In front sat the driver, a man with a walrus mustache and a large tobacco cud distending one brown cheek. In the back seat were George Hearst and one of his engineers. A transit used by surveyors stuck from the piled equipment which occupied the space by the driver—the handle of a shovel, a couple of blankets and a tarpaulin that had been thrown in there.

On the mountainside, in Kedwin's camp, men watched the approach of the lone vehicle across the rolling approach. Kedwin's supplies had come in by cart this way, making a two-wheeled, rutted track.

Hearst got down from his seat. His tall figure loomed there in the bright sunlight, and he waved his hat and shouted. A sentry turned, and went to report to the camp above.

The world was at peace. Butterflies and birds fluttered to and fro in the warmth of the day. Eastward lay the river. No longer spoiled by Kedwin's hydraulicking, it was cleaning itself and the level was dropping.

After a time, as Hearst waited and the wagon horses drowsed in the sun, half a dozen riders came down the rough mountain road, led by Smoky Lownes. Kedwin's Man Friday was pale under his weather tan. He had lost weight, and there were deep lines under his eyes. Strain had told on him, the strain of the long conflict between the Rio Kid and Fred Kedwin.

"Howdy, Senator," greeted Lownes, his drooping eyes fluttering with nervousness. His glance flicked this way and that as he checked the wagon, took in the driver, the duffle pile, the transit, Hearst and his engineer. "What can I do for yuh?" He had six alert gunnies at his back, and there was no sign of danger.

"You know who I am, then," said Hearst, nodding. "I'd like to talk to Fred Kedwin. They told me in Stirling that he's the owner of that claim up above. I'm interested in it."

Lownes perked up. "Yeah? Will yuh come up, Senator?"

Hearst shrugged. "I'll move along, but I'd rather not strain my wagon on that mountain track. Perhaps Kedwin will come down to meet me."

"I'll tell him."

Lownes galloped back to the camp.

Presently Fred Kedwin, looking huge in his thick leather jacket and heavy corduroys rode down to meet Hearst. Lownes had reported all clear, and no danger, and Kedwin was excited at Hearst's appearance, at the hint he might make a sale of his worthless gold mine.

He came to Hearst, who stood near the wagon, waiting. A dozen of his men, formerly Zaldini's hirelings, gathered in a bunch a few yards off, Kedwin waving them back with a blunt hand.

"How do you do, Senator Hearst?" he cried. "It's a pleasure to see you again!"

His mustache flicked and his dark-brown eyes were smiling. He almost fawned on the wealthy magnate.

"Well, Kedwin! It's some time since we met." Hearst regarded him, smiling. He had a dry sense of humor, and Kedwin seemed to tickle it. "I've come on business. Checking the records, we find you are the owner of the sections above here."

"Yes, full owner, fees paid, and improvements and the required amount of diggin' done, Senator. You're interested?"

"Very much, Kedwin. What will you take for your claim?"

Kedwin drew in a deep breath. His eyes narrowed. If Hearst wanted the claim it must be worth money.

"Half a million dollars—cash, Senator."

Hearst frowned. "That's a lot of money, sir."

The big fellow shrugged. "I happen to know what it is you're after, Senator. If my plans work out right, I may be able to get you the whole river valley. I'll let you know in a day or two."

"I see. Well—" Hearst hesitated. He turned to reach in the wagon and consult some charts his engineer indicated.

Kedwin was off guard, avid, about to realize his inordinate ambitions, to win a great fortune and compete with Hearst and such great financiers.

"Governor Stanford's interested in this region, too, I understand," he said softly, to prod Hearst.

"Quite true, Kedwin. But Stanford and I have agreed not to bid against each other. You see this?"

EAGERLY Kedwin stepped closer to the wagon. A dozen yards separated him from his riders who were slouched in their saddles, relaxed as they smoked quirlies.

"Reach, Kedwin!" a peremptory voice suddenly spoke from the artistically-piled impedimenta, on Kedwin's side of the wagon. "Yuh're under arrest!"

Kedwin jumped as though stuck with a dagger. His mustache flicked violently, bristling with his swift rage, and his eyes bulged as the Rio Kid rose from beneath the tarpaulin and blankets, a double-barreled shotgun in his hands.

"Why, you—" sputtered Kedwin, taking a step back.

Hearst and his engineer hastily ducked to the far side of the wagon. An iron plate and the thick hub of the wheel offered protection there. The driver slid off his seat, crouching on the ground, and all of them drew guns.

From a patch of woods a quarter of a mile away, horsemen spurted. Wyatt Earp and Murray's ranchers pounded in on the scene.

Kedwin shrieked. His dozen men were galvanized into action. Hands streaked to Colts, sagging in the holsters, and the Rio Kid, crouched by the wagon seat, fired past Kedwin, the buckshot scattering. It found several marks among the bunched gunnies. Horses snorted and bucked, and confusion seized the group.

The infuriated Kedwin, who had been enticed into a neat trap, took advantage of the Rio Kid's momentary preoccupation. He dropped to one knee to escape the swinging shotgun muzzle, and whipped a big Colt .45 from a holster inside his jacket.

It was rising to pin the Rio Kid when the shotgun roared a second time, and a pellet cut Kedwin, ruining his aim. His first slug drove high, missing Pryor, and then the Rio Kid hurled the sawed-off shotgun at Kedwin.

Kedwin's second shot went wide, the shotgun snarling him up. The Rio Kid's Colt roared, as it flew into his hand, and Kedwin's arms flapped out, wide. His gun fell from his fingers. A blue-red hole showed between his glazing eyes, and then he toppled, fell over on his face.

Hearst and his two men were opening up on the excited gunnies. They had split up, and as the Rio Kid turned his full attention to them, they saw their chief go down. Panic seized them and they turned, riding full-tilt for their camp.

Above, Smoky Lownes, seeing what happened, was marshaling the powerful gang. Revenge remained—revenge for Kedwin's death. They were mounting, to sweep out and destroy Hearst and the Rio Kid.

Back in the wagon, shooting to hurry the dozen men who had come with Kedwin, the Rio Kid and his friends swung the vehicle and the driver whipped the horses, rushing to meet Wyatt Earp and Murray's friends, hurrying up.

Earp had a dozen with him, among them Shorty and Red Phillips of the Square V, Vale's punchers. A great sweep of riders started down the mountain, to annihilate them. The wagon flew over the rough trail, bumping, it's wheels leaving the ground. Hearst hung on for dear life.

"I haven't had as much fun since the early

days at the Comstock, Rio Kid!" he said, grinning.

Pryor, gun in one hand, and clinging to the seat with the other, watched the attacking gunmen with Lownes. His eyes moved to the camp above, almost deserted as Smoky urged his avengers out for the kill. Earp and Murray were sweeping up to fight, but the killers were four men to one.

Then, over the crest above, he saw men appearing, running into position, quickly overpowering the few guards with their guns. A tall man in a sombrero and velvet, and a rangy man on whose breast the sun caught the glint of a sheriff's star, led the posse into position, and they started down, firing at the backs of Lownes' riders.

Mireles and Sheriff Ince were on hand. Led by the Mexican, they were carrying out the Rio Kid's plans. Celestino had taken them around by the route the Rio Kid had followed when he had spied on Kedwin's claim.

There were spare mustangs above, in rough corrals, and mounting, Ince and his followers quickly attacked.

Caught outside their fortifications, and with Kedwin dead on the flat at the foot of the mountain, the outlaws did not fight long. Guns banged wildly but as they heard the whistle of lead from behind and turned to see the sheriff and his men coming, the gunnies split in all directions, seeking escape.

"We've done it, Senator!" cried the Rio Kid. "Nothin' left but the roundup!"

EDITH THORPE smiled, as she sat holding to Johnny Vale's hand.

Vale was rapidly recuperating now, from the terrible wound. He was still weak, but his youthful resilience and health had saved him, abetted by the careful nursing given him by the girl he loved and who loved him.

It had taken several days to complete the negotiations with Hearst and Stanford. J. B. Hume, the Wells-Fargo man who had finally run down Black Bart, had taken his prisoner back to answer to the law. Hume had found stolen gold in "Professor" Bolton's bedroom and Black Bart, knowing the jig was up had taken him to a cache in the pine woods where his latest loot, ready to be picked up as he left the Square V, was buried.

Black Bart had lingered too long at Vale's ranch, which he had used as a screen for his criminal activities. A skillful actor, a magnificent walker and a good rider, he had kept ahead of the law for years. Kedwin, using Black Bart's trademark and methods, had angered the real outlaw, and alarmed him as well. He had feared he would have to answer a false murder charge, and had sought to clear his professional name, only to be taken in the toils.

The Rio Kid was taking his leave of his friends. His job was done, and Wyatt Earp and Mireles waited for him to say good-by.

Murray and his friends, as well as Edith Thorpe and Johnny Vale who were to be married when Vale was well, thanked Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid. "We'd all be done if it wasn't for you, Rio Kid," said Murray.

"'Twasn't anything but what a man ought to do," said Pryor, smiling. "Now it's over, we'll be ridin'. You won't have any more trouble, with Kedwin gone and Lownes and the gang under lock and key. And the deal with Hearst and Stanford is settled. Yuh'll be well off. Yuh can sell out and hit for wherever yuh're a-mind to."

"Say, how'd Kedwin get on to the fact there's rock oil under our range?" asked Vale.

"Zaldini and Kedwin held up Hearst's party on their way here. Hearst had notes in his pocket, tellin' of the secret discovery of petroleum in this valley, and the fact there seemed to be huge pools of it. So Kedwin, his hydraulickin' a flop, tried to take the hills and the Square V, meanin' to get control and sell at a fortune to Hearst and Stanford. When Hearst told me about the oil, I figgered out how Kedwin come to discover the secret."

Rock oil, petroleum, was coming more and more into prominence as a source of mineral wealth. Millions of lamps in the growing nation were thirsty for kerosene, and medicines were made from the stuff.

The smiling Rio Kid shook hands all around, patted Vale on the back. "The best man won, Johnny," he said softly, and then Edith Thorpe kissed the Rio Kid good-by.

"Thanks, ma'am," he murmured. "I won't be here for the weddin', but I wish yuh the best luck. *Adios!*"

The three lithe riders left the gathering and leaped to their saddled horses in the yard. The Rio Kid turned to wave at the girl, who had come to the front porch with her friends. He was smiling, debonair, strong.

Out of sight around the hill and headed south for the road from California and the Sierra, his eyes grew somber.

"She's a beauty," he muttered, and he sighed.

Then his shoulders squared, and he set Saber's head on the trail, to the wild life he led on the Frontier.

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FURTHER EXPLOITS OF THE RIO KIO IN

WAGONS TO CALIFORNIA

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING COMPLETE NOVEL

Eddie stared at the man and the gun

A Job Well Done

By BEN FRANK

Suddenly out of Eddie Harper's past there stalked a sneering ghost which threatened to rob him of his liberty!

EDDIE HARPER lugged the last fifty-pound salt block from the alley through the side door into the long, narrow storeroom and slapped it on the high pile. The white blocks against the wall looked like a stone rampart.

Whistling off key, Eddie mopped his dripping freckled face on his shirt sleeve, stepped across to an old iron safe—which had been discarded when the first bank came to the little cowtown of Mercer—and picked up his battered Stetson from the rusty top. He eyed the wall of salt approvingly. It represented a job well done. A couple of years ago, this wouldn't have meant anything to Eddie Harper. That was before he'd met June Brewster.

"Come here a minute, Eddie," Old Man Brewster called from the main room of the feed store.

Eddie clamped the hat over his shock of reddish-brown hair and went in to see what the old man wanted.

Brewster was standing by the door, raking a horny hand across his stubbly chin.

"My day for a shave and a haircut and all the trimmin's," he grinned at Eddie. "Look after things, son."

The old man left, and Eddie sauntered over to the door and rolled a cigarette. He liked the old man. He liked his job. Sometimes the work was hard, like when they got in a car load of salt, but he didn't mind. It was a heap better than what might have happened if he hadn't had a break a couple of years ago. Right now, he might be riding the owl-hoot trail if it hadn't been for that break. He shuddered a little at the thought and took a deep drag on the quirly.

Al Hammond's boy came along, kicking up dust with his bare feet and choo-chooing like a locomotive. Eddie liked kids.

"Ma wants fifty cents' worth of cracked corn," he said.

Eddie weighed up the corn. The kid went choo-chooing out. He looked back at the grinning Eddie and said, "I'm a Union Pacific freight."

Lazily Eddie stood in the door, his lean, muscular frame propped against the sill, and watched a herd of XX cattle bawling their way toward the stockyards. After this, he went over

to the cash register and rang up the fifty cents. He whistled with surprise as he noted the pile of money in the drawer. Yesterday had been Wednesday, always a big day in Mercer, and the old man hadn't got around to banking the day's take.

A shadow crossed the counter. Eddie glanced up. A man had come in noiselessly through the storeroom and stood grinning crookedly at Eddie and the open drawer of the cash register. He held a big Colt in a rock-like fist.

"You look surprised to see me, Kid," he purred.

EDDIE felt his middle tighten up. Little beads of sweat popped out on his forehead, and he forgot to shut the cash register. That mistake he'd made a couple of years ago had caught up with him at last!

"Del Paxton," he found himself saying. "What do yuh want?"

Del Paxton was a big man. He towered over Eddie. His close-set smoke-gray eyes were cold.

"I want that *dinero* in the cash register, Eddie," he said. "You and me are goin' into business together."

Eddie stared at the man and the gun. And in a few seconds, his mind flashed back, a couple of years, to that night, over in the Cherokee County, when he was punching cows on the Triangle spread. He'd gone into the Playhouse and flashed his fifty-dollar roll.

Del Paxton had bought Eddie a drink.

"Want to double that roll, Kid?" Paxton asked.

"Shore," Eddie said. "Now it's my turn to buy yuh a drink."

They drank again.

Paxton had a rep of being quite a gambler and Eddie had admired the swaggering, barrel-chested hombre. Eddie was flattered at Paxton's sudden attention. He puffed out his chest and hooked his thumbs under his gun belt.

"What about doublin' my roll?" he asked.

Paxton leaned toward him, said in a confidential tone, "I've had my eye on you for some time. Been noticin' the way you pack a gun, carry your liquor. I like your cut."

Eddie grinned at him. This was music to his ears.

"See that Skinny jasper sittin' at that back table," Paxton went on. "He's a whiskey drummer. Come today on the stage. Got a roll of *dinero* that'd stagger a banker. He's itchin' to do a little gamblin'. Let's me and you take him for a cleanin'."

Exactly an hour later, Eddie's fifty dollars were gone.

He went out into the street, cursing the whiskey drummer's run of luck. Bill Mack, a Triangle ranny, came up.

"Paxton played you for a sucker," he grinned.

"Yuh're loco!" Eddie said. "Paxton lost more'n I did."

"Shore, but he'll get his back, and more, too. That guy ain't a whiskey drummer. He's a gambler from Denver—a friend of Paxton's. They've been cleanin' up all the greenhorns."

The more Eddie mulled this over in his mind, the madder he got. That fifty dollars represented two months' work. He laid for Paxton that night.

He caught the gambler alone about three o'clock in the morning and stuck a gun against his big chest.

"I want my money," he said. "The money you and that crook took from me."

"Sure, Kid," Paxton said silkily, reaching into a coat pocket. "How much did you lose?"

"Fifty dollars," Eddie said.

Paxton hauled out a roll of bills. "Take that gun out of my ribs," he said in an injured tone. "I intended all the time to see that you got your money back. I like your cut, Kid."

"Shore?" Eddie rasped. "Give me my money."

Suddenly the big man's big hand flashed down, caught the six-gun in a grip of steel and twisted it out of Eddie's fist. Then Eddie was staring into the muzzle and trying to figure out just what had happened.

Paxton chuckled. "Kid, you're all right. You got nerve, but you lack training. Here's your fifty and here's your gun. Take 'em."

Eddie took the gun and the money. He didn't know what to think. Maybe Paxton wasn't so bad after all.

"Thanks," he gurgled.

"Forget it," Paxton said. "Who knows, maybe you can do something for me some day."

Del Paxton looked Eddie up the next day. "Kid," he said, "you and me are goin' to make some easy *dinero* tonight. Old man Sorenson don't believe in banks. He keeps his money in that tin cracker box he calls a safe. Kid, I know safes. I can open that one with my eyes shut. You're goin' to stand just outside his store and keep a look-see, while I get the *dinero*."

"Del," Eddie said, "I'd do most anything yuh asked except something like that. I ain't no saint, but I won't do that for you."

PAXTON'S six-shooter flashed in his hand. "Everybody knows you lost all your money last night, playin' poker," he grated. "How'd you like me to march you into the sheriff's office and tell about you holdin' me up? Then when we found that *dinero* on you, I reckon you'd be in for trouble."

"Then I'd tell about yuh wantin' me to help rob Sorenson."

Paxton laughed. "How would you prove it?"

Stunned, Eddie stared at the man. He wouldn't be able to prove a thing. He knew he was trapped.

"All right," he husked, "I'll string along with yuh."

But a lucky break had saved him. Paxton

was arrested that same day for a crime he'd committed in another part of the state. Then Eddie quit the Triangle and rode away from the place where he'd made the mistake that had almost made him an outlaw. He'd learned his lesson. No more wandering, no more sprees, no more Del Paxtons. Give him a steady job and a chance to get ahead. That's all he asked.

A couple of weeks later, he went to work for old man Brewster. And he met the old man's brown-eyed daughter.

And now, after two years, he was staring into the big ugly face of Del Paxton again, and the late morning sun was splashing into the feed store, and the cash register was bulging with money. Eddie had a feeling there wouldn't be any lucky break this time. If he got out of this jam, it would be by his own effort. Right now, there didn't seem much chance of doing anything except what Paxton told him to do.

"I see you ain't carryin' a gun," Paxton observed.

"No," Eddie admitted and thought of his old .44 in the bottom dresser drawer in his room. "What do yuh want with me?"

Paxton holstered his gun. "I like you, Kid—like your cut." His voice was silky. "When I was doin' my stretch, I used to say to myself, 'Del, Eddie Harper has got courage. Train him right, and he'll make you a good partner.' So I've come for you. Goin' to start your trainin' right away.

"While I been hangin' around this mornin', tryin' to catch you alone, I been takin' a look at the town. I seen they got only one man at the bank. And the bank is right next door."

"Shore," Eddie said and felt his throat go dry.

"I got my hoss in the old shed back of this buildin'. I seen there's another hoss in the shed. A good hoss—and a saddle."

"That's my outfit," Eddie gulped.

"Kind of figured it was," Paxton said. "So I saddled it for you."

Eddie could only stare at the man.

Paxton went on, "You and me'll drift into the bank. We'll tie up that banker stack the *dinero*, come back through the feed store, go out that side door and grab our hosses. Then we'll hightail it for the hills. We'll have a good head start. It's a cinch."

"Shore," Eddie agreed. "Only I ain't goin' to do it. I learned my lesson two years ago. I got a good job here and I'm keepin' it. I've got plans for the future. I'm savin' a little money and I've got my eye on a little spread south of here. It's the straight and narrow for me, Del—no owlhoot."

Paxton's eyes narrowed. "That's what you think, Kid," he grated. The big six-shooter jabbed into Eddie's stomach. "I need you to help me on this bank holdup. You'll do as I say, or take a slug in the heart. Reckon after we pull this first job, you'll be willin' enough to string along with me. It'll beat doing a stretch for bank robbery."

Eddie looked down at the gun, up into Paxton's hard eyes. He remembered that rumor about Paxton killing a couple of men. Killing a third wouldn't make much difference to a badman who'd already spilled blood.

Eddie drew a deep breath. It looked like he was in for it. That little mistake he'd made back in Rayburn had grown into a monster that was about to end everything he'd planned to do. This was the end of things for June and him. It was the owlhoot trail now; that or a bullet.

"What do you say, Kid?" Paxton asked softly.

"I reckon I'll string along with you," Eddie choked.

Paxton grinned and holstered the gun. "Now you're showin' sense." He slapped Eddie on the shoulder. "We'll do big things. Why, this job here won't be chicken feed compared with what we'll do later on. A few big jobs, Kid, and we'll be ridin' easy."

"Yep," Eddie gulped. "Mebbe."

PAXTON began scooping up the contents of the cash register. "Shore might as well take this while we're at it," he said. "Ain't much, but it'll buy a few bottles of good liquor."

Then Eddie had an idea. Maybe he had a chance after all. A slim chance, but one worth trying. He had a lot at stake. June Brewster, maybe a couple of kids, that little spread south of town. A man had to take a chance for things like that.

"That money," Eddie said, curling his lips into a sneer, "ain't even chicken feed compared with what the old man has got in his safe."

At this Paxton's hand stopped in mid air. "What's that?" he grunted.

"Ain't chicken feed," Eddie repeated. "The old man is like old Sorenson back in Rayburn—he don't believe in banks. He's been in business here twenty years and has still got the first dime he ever made. And it's all in his safe. If I'm goin' into business with yuh, I ain't passin' up anything."

Paxton ran his tongue over thick lips. "What're you gettin' at, Kid?"

"The boss keeps his money in that old safe in the storeroom. It's sort of dark in there. Maybe you didn't notice the safe?"

"No," Paxton said. He looked into the storeroom. "I see it now. It's a dickens of a lookin' box to keep money in."

"I got a peek in it one day," Eddie went on. "I've got no idea how much money the old man's got. Yuh told me once yuh could open a safe like that."

"It'd be a cinch. But it would take time."

"We got considerable time yet. When the old man goes to the barber shop, he makes a morning of it. If any customers come in, I'll wait on 'em as usual. Nobody'll know yuh're in there, workin' on that safe."

"Look, Kid"—Paxton's lips made a straight thin slit, "if this is a stall for time, or if you try to pull a fast one on me, I'll shoot you all to pieces."

Eddie managed a feeble grin. "I ain't so dumb," he said. "I know what yuh'd do."

Paxton backed into the storeroom, and Eddie followed as far as the door. Paxton pulled out his six-gun.

"I ain't exactly trustin' you, yet," he said. "You stand right there where I can keep an eye on you—and you can see the front door. If anything goes wrong, I'll let you have it."

The big man got down on his knees in front of the safe and laid the gun where it would be handy. Eddie put a hand on a block of salt and felt the whole wall of blocks wobble a little. "Hurry it up, Del," he said. "We ought to finish off the bank, too, before the old man gets back."

Paxton reached for the combination dial. The moment he touched it, Eddie knew, he'd find out that Eddie had been lying, because the safe door wasn't locked and the dial wouldn't turn. It had been jammed tight many years ago. Eddie had tried to turn it one time. It was frozen solid.

Paxton's big fingers wrapped around the knob. He gave a little grunt of surprise when the dial refused to turn. His eyes widened, his face contracted, and his hand reached toward the gun. Eddie put his weight against the wall of salt blocks and shoved.

The blocks had been piled up like the wall of a brick house, each layer staggered with the layer below. The wall swayed, went off balance and tumbled.

Paxton saw the fifty-pound blocks coming. He was as quick as a cat. His hand doubled around the six-gun, came up flaming. The slug knocked Eddie back through the doorway. His whole left arm went numb, and the blood made a little puddle on the floor where his hand lay like a limp rag. He saw Paxton aim for a second shot. And then the blocks thudded about the big man and on him. He screamed once, then was quiet.

Eddie just sat there, staring at the mess in the storeroom and gripping his bleeding arm. The arm had begun to hurt now, and the shock of this business made him a little sick.

Then old man Brewster, his hair all lathered up with shampoo, barged into the room, looking like a frowzy-headed wildman. Right behind him came the sheriff, half his face shaved, the other half frosted with drying lather. The old man got Eddie a drink, and the sheriff tied up Eddie's bloody arm.

EDDIE felt better after that, and he told them everything, beginning with that poker game back in Rayburn up to right now.

The sheriff went into the storeroom and moved salt blocks until he could see Del Paxton. He came back, wiping his hands on a red bandana.

"Why," he said, "I got that feller's picture in my files. He's the man who busted a guard over the head and got away from the prison yard last week. Reckon he won't be goin' back to prison. One of them fifty-pound blocks got him on the top of the head."

Eddie looked at old man Brewster. The old man hadn't said much. That worried Eddie. The old man was funny about some things. Maybe he wouldn't want a man working for him who'd made a mistake and almost got himself turned into an owlhooter. Maybe this would finish Eddie with the old man's daughter. Suddenly Eddie wanted to know for certain how things stood.

"I'm sorry about messin' up the storeroom, Mr. Brewster," he began, "but as soon as my arm's all right, I'll pile that salt up again—if yuh'll still want me to work here?"

"Son," the old man said, "I was just thinkin'. I ain't had a vacation for twenty years. 'Bout time for me to take off some time. Figure a feller who can use his head like you did ought to have no trouble runnin' a feed store. So, you're the new boss. You can do as you dern please about straightenin' up that storeroom."

Eddie grinned and got unsteadily to his feet. He had to go tell June about this. Gee-whiz, he still had one good arm, didn't he? A feller could hold a girl mighty tight with one arm.

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Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

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Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

A score of yelping riders charged the visitors

THE TEST

By BEN T. YOUNG

When Fort Laramie was threatened by a big Indian uprising, Second Lieutenant Martin Ware was given the opportunity to win or die!

FROM the open doorway of the log building housing the bachelor officers at Fort Laramie, Second Lieutenant Martin Ware gazed at the June moon an hour high over the North Platte Valley, and thought of tawny-haired Theresa Tindall.

Theresa was only thirty miles away, at the Horseshoe stage-station next up the Overland Trail but thirty miles is a half-day's ride for even a cavalryman, and when a man's in command of a company he can't just go—

"Commandin' off'cer's comp'munts, sir," a headquarters orderly panted, after a sliding stop and a smart salute. "Commandin' off'cer desires to see the lootenant at post headquarters."

Wonder what old Iron Wall wants now? Ware asked himself, stepping inside for coat and hat. While crossing the cottonwood-bordered parade he searched his conscience for possible derelictions. Since his captain had been on sick-leave he'd kept the troopers up to

snuff; and, as the Sioux and Cheyennes had been quiet as frozen sage-hens, there'd been little else to do. His gambling debts and bill at the sutler's store were paid. What could it be then?

"Go right in, sir," the sergeant-major directed as Ware entered the dim-lit orderly room.

"Mr. Ware," the colonel known as Iron Wall said, when the military formalities were done with and the door closed, "you've not been with us long."

"Just a year, sir, since I managed a transfer from Jefferson Barracks."

"H-mmm." The gimlet-eyed campaigner who'd trailed Seminoles in Florida and used a saber with Taylor at Palo Alto, drew thoughtfully on his cigar and studied the slim shavetail with the dark eager face. "Wanted some action, eh? And it's been quiet. Unfortunate, in a way, for I've had no opportunity to see how you might handle something other than garrison routine. Sit down."

Obeying, Ware was about as much at ease as a cannoneer on a gun limber.

"The army's to be expanded," the colonel went on. "New regiments will, of course, require officers; which means quick promotion for selected younger files. You're near the top of the list of second lieutenants, and the department commander has asked for a report on your qualifications."

Ware's heart jumped like a spooked troop-horse. Great snakes, on a first lieutenant's pay and allowances, he could support a wife.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "that there's been no chance for me to—"

"But there is one," the colonel broke in, his ruddy face suddenly taking on its bread-and-water look. "How d'you feel about Indians? Got the idea, like so many young hellions who've never smelled powder, that a squadron of cavalry could lick the whole Sioux Nation? Think Indians are nothing but thieves and beggars who should be hunted down like coyotes?"

"No, sir. Save for those who hang about the post here, I know little about them; but I don't suppose they're any greater thieves and beggars than the general run of whites. The way we're pushing into their country, I don't wonder they're getting uneasy. Aside from the steady stream of settlers going through, and the new Pony Express, they see that wild mob of gold-seekers headed for Pike's Peak, and the town of Denver springing up almost over night.

"Later, when the Pacific Telegraph comes building on from Fort Kearney, and the railroad from Omaha—well, one can't blame them much. And should it come to a fight I wouldn't underrate them."

"Those your ideas? Or are you just repeating what Jim Bridger has told you?"

Stiffening, Ware thought of the hours he'd spent questioning the old frontiersman who made the post his home. Maybe he, Ware, had sounded off on the wrong side. The wily colonel had given him a lead, and he'd followed it like a blindfolded jackass. Well, the heck with it. That's how he felt about Indians, so—

"I've talked with Bridger a lot, sir," he said. "But I've formed my own opinions. In courage, and skill with firearms, the plains Indian is not the equal of a trained regular. But his constant stalking of game, and fighting other tribes, has given him a thorough knowledge of the science of security and information. He knows how to pick his own time and place to fight. It makes him dangerous."

"H-mmm." The gimlet eyes widened.

RISING, the colonel glared at the millers quarreling with the coal-oil bracket lamp. Then he strode to the open window and stood staring out as the buglers sounded tattoo and the barracks went dark.

"See how you can handle this," he said, abruptly facing about. "The eastbound stage this evening left a message to me from Gideon Tindall at Horseshoe Station. Some poor fool pilgrim with a train resting there, abandoned a lame old ox. Or, maybe as he claims, it strayed. Anyway, one of those friendly Sioux bucks camped on Horseshoe Creek found the thing, killed it, and jerked the beef.

"The pilgrim got wind of it and howled for payment. The Sioux said he was sorry and offered a pony, but the pilgrim isn't satisfied. He's raised so much trouble that the Indians are getting mad, and Tindall is afraid something might come of it.

"Have your company ready to march at drill call in the morning," the colonel ordered. "Take three days' rations. Go up there and iron out the mess. I'll not tell you how. Use your own judgment. If your judgment's bad, and you're still alive, I'll see that you're busted out of the service. If it's good, you may get promoted. That's all."

Taps had sounded by the time Ware had left directions with Cook, his first sergeant, then returned to his own small bare room. Sleep was farthest from his racing thoughts. Muff this, Mister, and you're through, he warned himself, chewing the stem of his unlit pipe. Maybe she'll be, too. Why old Tindall didn't send her down to safety on the stage that brought word, I can't see.

Hurriedly he reviewed several paragraphs of a translation of von Moltke on tactical principles, and wished he had only stick-to-the-rules Prussians to deal with instead of elusive devils who could outsmart a fox. His stomach churned as though he'd been drinking alkali water, and he illogically blamed the cook.

He repolished his best boots, though his striker had done an excellent job, and he put fresh loads in his .44 Colt. But it was not until his Tiffany saber slipped from his perspiring hands and clattered onto the deal table, that

the adjutant beyond the thin partition lost patience and bade him quit fumbling around like a militia recruit and go to bed. . . .

Businesslike. That's how the outfit looked next morning as it swung into column of two's and followed him at a smart trot off the parade and onto the rutted trail that a man could travel clear to Oregon if he had the stamina.

The early sun glinted on bits and spurs and revolver butts, picked out highlights on the polished stocks of Sharps carbines riding in their boots. The red-and-white guidon snapped in the sage-scented breeze, and the canvas-covered escort wagon carrying their needs for three days, rattled along behind with the same stirring rumble a caisson makes.

Now that Ware was moving he felt better, and his outfit felt good. The horses danced, and slugged at their bits. The troopers, riding now at route-order, answered the whistles of the larks flushed from the grass beside the trail; and the guidon-corporal sang a snatch of bawdy song about an Arapahoe gal and La Ramée, the French trapper for whom the post was named.

Walk a while, trot a while; and after fifty minutes they'd kicked five miles behind. As they halted to rest, the red-wheeled C. O. C. & P. P. stage overtook them, and Ware flagged it down.

"Possible trouble up ahead," he warned the driver. "Stay with us."

While the troopers tightened *cinchas* and adjusted equipment, Ware studied the terrain. Across the muddy slow-moving Platte which the trail sided, the rolling, almost-treeless country fell away toward the distant Black Hills. He could see for miles ahead, too. But marching with the trail on its left was a ridge which blocked his view to the south, and when they started again he sent out flankers.

"Signal if you see anything," he told them.

Witahin the hour one did. Slowing the outfit to a walk Ware took the bugler and spurred up a gully to join the man.

"What is it, Slade?"

Slade, a lantern-jawed veteran of a campaign against Apaches in New Mexico, pointed a gloved finger.

"Does the lieutenant see the clump of sage on the far side of that draw? It's growed there of a sudden. A Sioux brung it, and a Sioux will fling it away soon's we've passed. They're watchin'."

Ware put his glasses on the bit of brush.

"Probably so," he said, "but unless they show in force, pay no attention. Move out."

IT WAS after one o'clock when Ware sighted the stage station, a huddle of corrals and log buildings at the mouth of Horseshoe Creek. Telling Cook to take over, he reined off the road, focused his glasses and searched the narrow valley of the creek. For months there'd been a cluster of lodges there, the homes of friendly Sioux who liked to trade at the store, and watch the travelers pass. Now there were no lodges. Come to think of it, there'd been no Indians about the fort this morning, either.

Bad, he admitted as he cantered back to the head of the column. Were they still in only an arguing mood they'd have hung around. They've moved their squaws, kids and old folks back out of the way. Probably every able-bodied buck in both Platte Valleys has been summoned to a rendezvous in the hills. Now that their scouts have estimated our strength, thought Ware, they may attack at sunup.

He had thirty men. Tindall, with his blacksmith, harness-maker, stock-keepers and others, would make ten more; and the men with the immigrant train, corraled just beyond the station, would make perhaps another twenty. Sixty against how many? What to do?

I could get a fresh mount and send back for help, he worried. Surely the colonel didn't realize it was so serious, or— Maybe I should try to handle it myself? If it weren't for Theresa and the other women here—

Flinging up his hand, he halted the column just short of the station.

"Don't unsaddle. Just loosen *cinchas*, and water and picket the horses," he told Cook, jerking his thumb toward the wind-blown grass beside the road. "We'll eat, and rest for two hours. May camp here, may not."

Having unslung his saber from the saddle he fixed it to his belt, brushed and slapped the worst of the dust from his uniform, and strode off toward the station.

The coach had already moved up there. The express messenger and passengers had alighted and were mingling with the station attendants. Ware saw red-headed Tindall and another man, both definitely in a state of agitation, leave the group and hurry to meet him.

Theresa was with him, and for a moment he forgot all else. The breeze played about her soft green dress and tumbled her hair into a lovely brush-heap. A year on the frontier hadn't hurt her looks one bit. She was as fresh and dainty as the day he'd met her on the stage coming out from St. Louis.

He removed his hat, but before he could say anything Tindall began to yell.

"How far behind is the main body?" he demanded.

"This is it."

"Hell's flames! I ask for help and they send a scouting party under a boy!"

"Why, Papa!" Theresa's wide-set blue eyes were alight with pride. "I think this is fine. Mart's colonel must have great confidence in him. I just know—"

"Pap, when we need whiskey!" the other man with Tindall scoffed. "A whippersnapper with a sword!"

Ware had never before seen this gangling untidy fellow redolent of buffalo-chip campfires, and he blistered him with a look.

"Mister," he said. "I don't know who you—"

"Wetzel" Tindall growled. "The buzzard who stirred up this ruckus."

"That's right!" Wetzel yapped. "An' I'm a-goin' to have them red whelps did for, or I'll write my Ioway congressman."

"Your Iowa congressman," Ware pointed out, "won't be interested, now that you're no longer a voter there. Where are the Indians?"

"Makin' medicine about a mile up the creek," Tindall said. "Drums thumped all night. From the noise they made there's a power of 'em. They'll outnumber us five to one. What yuh aim to do? Sit here and wait?"

"No, by cripus!" Wetzel shot a stream of liquid tobacco near Ware's feet. "Yuh're so smart with yore gold braid and brass buttons. Yuh jest hiper up there and arrest that thievin' Bear-that-Jumps, or whatever his name is."

"Bear-that-Walks," Theresa corrected. "He's a good old Indian, Mart. His squaw told me they'd found that ox wandering loose farther from the trail than it would have strayed unless abandoned. It was old and lame and gaunt, and they supposed the owner hadn't wanted it any more. I think so, too, till he thought he saw a way to work a mean trick."

Again Wetzel opened his loose mouth, but closed it promptly as both Ware and Tindall glared. Ware turned to study the hills.

"I *will* go up there," he declared after a moment, "as soon as I've had a bite to eat."

Theresa's face went white and tight as a drumhead, and Tindall wagged his head.

"They'll gobble yore little outfit alive."

"I'm not taking it. Just Wetzel and I will go."

"Me?" The pilgrim seemed to shrivel.

"Yes." Ware's dark eyes were suddenly as uncompromising as gun muzzles. "You started this, now you'll help me finish it. Please keep an eye on him, Mr. Tindall, till I'm ready."

"I'll give you dinner, Mart," Theresa said, jerking her head toward the station. "We've eaten."

SILENTLY she led him to the living-quarters at the near end of the long main building, quarters which she kept as spotless as a West Point barrack, but more comfortable. Leaving hat, field-glasses and side-arms in the small dining room, he went into the kitchen which served also as the public eating-room. At a wash-bench outside the door he policed himself, then went back.

"You're either very brave or a complete fool," Theresa scolded, as she set down a platter of cold buffalo tongue. "If—"

She broke off as the cook entered with soda biscuits and coffee.

"I'm simply trying to do my job with as little loss of life as possible," Ware said when the woman had left. "If I wait here while the Indians gain strength and whip themselves into added frenzy, we'll all be killed. If I go marching into their camp with my outfit, some hothead on one side or the other may start something. Either course would probably touch off a war costing hundreds of lives. Alone, save for Wetzel, I may be able to avert it."

Theresa placed a napkin beside his plate.

"But I'm afraid," she insisted quietly. "Not for myself, but for you."

"And I'm afraid for both of us, for all of us. That's why I've got to do this. Anyway"—his tense face broke into a grin—"as a soldier's wife you'll—"

"Say!" Tindall bellowed, flinging open the door. "If yuh're goin' to be a chump and parley with those Indians, maybe I'd better be another chump and go along. I can talk their lingo."

"So can I, enough to make out. Learned from Bridger. What principal chief will I likely find up there?"

"He Dog, as tough a pelican as ever lifted a scalp. He's a Sans Arc Sioux."

"Do you suppose he understands the Lakota tongue?"

"Sure. The Sans Arc are just a sub-tribe of Lakota Sioux, like the Oglalas and Hunkpapas. Sure yuh don't want me along?"

Ware shook his head and Tindall slammed out again.

The young lieutenant crossed to where Theresa was staring out of a small-paned window. Gently he turned her about and took her in his arms. She lifted her face, and for a long moment their lips clung, her body warm and alive against his. Then she pushed him away.

"Don't," she murmured in a tight voice, winking back tears. "You only make it harder."

Two steps took him to the chair where he'd left his hat and equipment. Picking up the hat, he turned.

"If I don't come back, and you live," he said tonelessly, "I want you to have the belt and saber, and your father the glasses. I've a young brother back in Vermont who'd like the revolver, if you'll send it to him."

In ten minutes he'd left his orders with Sergeant Cook.

"You're in command till I return," he said. "If I'm not back by dark I'll not be coming; and under no circumstances are you to come after me. Just make your dispositions to defend the place, and send to the post for help.

"On one of those mail-carrying ponies Tindall has, a good rider should reach Laramie by midnight, and a forced march would bring reinforcements by seven or eight in the morning. Sioux don't like night fighting; but watch for horse thieves, and an attack at dawn. Don't let these women or children be taken alive."

Stage crew and passengers were just finishing their dinner in the public eating-room. In the store and barroom he found Tindall and Wetzel. The pilgrim, his stubbled face as long as a bull-whacker's whip, was trying to generate some courage with a shot of Drake's Plan-

tation Bitters. From the waistband of his buckskin pants protruded the walnut butt of an old Butterfield revolver.

"Leave that thing here," Ware ordered, pointing to the revolver, "and come along. It's nearly three o'clock."

"I'm not a-goin' 'thout no gun," Wetzel whined. "Fact is, I ain't a-goin' a-tall. Let the Injun have the skinny ol' bull."

"Too late to think of that now," Ware said. He took the Butterfield and handed it to the barkeeper. "You've started the making of a first-class war, and if you lose your frowsy scalp trying to prevent it, well and good. Come on."

In the doorway Ware turned back to Tindall.

"Hold the eastbound stage if it gets here. It might never reach Laramie, and you may need the extra men and guns."

Tindall didn't answer. The barkeeper didn't move. Inside and out the whole place seemed hushed and tense, as though life had been suddenly arrested.

Shortly, prodding Wetzel before him, Ware was on the narrow trail leading to the head of Horseshoe Creek.

"Why'n tarnation didn't we ride?" Wetzel panted.

"Because a couple of ponies would be just an added inducement for them to club us."

Ware had his eye on what appeared to be a flat gray rock at the crest of the ridge. With exaggerated casualness he turned his head and looked back down at the station, and when he shot a quick glance at the gray spot again it was gone. A scout under a blanket, he told himself, biting his lips and trying to swallow the dry metallic taste on his tongue. They'll be expecting us.

DESPITE the heat, cold sweat was trickling down his back, and standing out on his face; and he could smell the fear oozing from the pores of the unhappy pilgrim.

"Cripus!" Wetzel wailed as they topped the ridge and saw, entirely filling a wide shallow draw, the Indian encampment—tepees, smoke, ponies. And through it all a constantly shifting pattern of raw color as bucks and squaws and children moved about.

"What yuh expect me to do?" Wetzel bleated, his voice becoming increasingly shrill and plaintive, like the sound from an overheated axle. "Want I should admit I'm a liar?"

"No. A confession of that sort would hurt white prestige." Ware's knees no longer seemed to be unhinged. He was marching as though with trumpets and drums. "We'll say you've decided to withdraw your claim, and are glad that Bear-that-Walks has food for his family. Then—"

Abruptly, startlingly, the camp spewed forth a score of yelping riders. They charged the visitors.

"Gosh!" Wetzel whimpered.

Ware made no sound. With open hand raised as a sign of peace, he stood—waiting.

"*Hie! Hie!*" the foremost rider was squalling, his feathered lance leveled at Ware's chest.

Braced, Ware kept his hand aloft, his eyes steady on the hideously painted face low over the dun pony's head. It would have been nice to have been a first lieutenant, and married to Theresa Tindall, but—

At the last instant the dun swerved, and the butt of the lance just touched Ware's shoulder. In quick succession three more bows or lances struck both whites. In a flash Ware realized that the youths were counting *coups*. Next would come the kill.

"Leave them be!" a latecomer ordered, thrusting through the milling mob. "He Dog wants to see them!"

Ware let his breath out through his tight lips. A pony roughly shouldered him from behind.

"*Hopo,*" a voice growled disgustedly. "Let's go, then."

Crowded by sweating horse-flesh, prodded by bony knees and moccasined feet, they were shoved toward the camp. Then the escort reined away, disclosing an older man standing before a painted tepee.

Ware's quick eyes took in the upright black-tipped eagle feather at the back of his head, the shirt of buckskin decorated with quillwork and tassels of human hair. The craggy face was as hard and dark as a block of obsidian.

"How, *mita kola,*" Ware said. "We come in peace."

With a grunt, He Dog turned and went into the tepee and beckoned them to follow. Forthwith the bucks, squaws and naked children surrounded the extra-large tent, lifted the sides and crowded close.

The nostrils of the chief's hawklike nose flared with disdain as Wetzel showed his abject fear. That Ware did not flinch from the circle of dark hostile faces seemed to please He Dog.

"You are a war-chief," he said gravely.

Ware nodded. "A sub-chief of the pony soldiers. I come to settle the misunderstanding between this traveler and Bear-that-Walks."

A sign from the chief brought Bear-that-Walks, a shambling, poorly-dressed veteran whose pockmarked face was the color and texture of scorched leather. His eyes, though, were young and very much alive, and they snapped with intense raw hate as they darted to Wetzel.

"Makes lie-talk," he asserted without prologue.

"No, brother," Ware contradicted, with the best smile he could muster. "His talk is straight and true. The beast was his, it helped draw his wagon, and he mourned its loss. However, the war-chief at Fort Laramie sent word that there must be no trouble between the

children of the Grandfather at Washington. This man, then, is now glad that his brother, Bear-that-Walks, has meat for his family. It is a gift."

His expression unchanged, Bear-that-Walks turned to He Dog. Ware held his breath in an agony of suspense. Then, as the chief shook his head, a sick, sinking feeling took hold of him.

"Too late," the chief said. "The young men, the Fox Soldiers, want war."

"Hie! Hie!" came from outside. "Kill them!"

"We're goners!" Wetzel groaned.

"Maybe so," Ware snapped. "But try to be a credit to your race. They'll not touch us in here, and when we step outside they'll end it promptly. Sioux do not take grown men prisoners." He looked again at He Dog. "Who is the leader of the Fox Soldiers?"

With the lordly pride of a wild stallion, He Dog threw up his head as the young brave who had ridden the dun pony crawled into the tent.

"Far Thunder, my son," the chief announced.

For a long moment Far Thunder and Ware looked deep into each other's eyes.

"Friend," Ware said then, "you are foolish to make war. You may get a few ponies, some food, some scalp-locks; but many of you will be killed now, and later, for the war-chiefs at Fort Laramie and Fort Kearney will send many more pony soldiers, walking soldiers, wagon soldiers with big guns. The warriors of the white Grandfather are more numerous than the leaves on the trees. You will have no time to hunt, and the buffalo will be scared away. And when the snows come your people will be cold and hungry.

"This man with me has made a gift to one of your old men. You propose to repay him by making war. Bridger, my friend and yours, says the Lakotas have a proverb that only the brave are just. Are you being just?"

IT WAS a speech worthy of a riled-up senator. Ware had put everything he had into it, and now he was through. The cards were down. Making the sign that talk was ended, he motioned for Wetzel to follow, and started out of the tent. He might get away with it, might not.

"Stop!" He Dog ordered, and the two faced about.

"You," the chief said to Ware, "have made a speech full of good sense. We old men take your words, but the young men will not be denied. My son has smoked the war-pipe, and unless—"

A sudden uproar outside, a scream, and as Ware whirled and stepped out he saw a pony plunging and kicking in the fringe of the close-packed crowd. A half-naked lad, entangled in the trailing lariat, had been jerked off his feet and under the pounding hoofs, and was almost sure to be trampled to a pulp.

Like the muzzle blast from a gun, Ware leaped forward. The pony reared, but he caught the rawhide rope close to its neck. Sheer desperation gave him the strength to jerk the off-balanced animal sidewise away from the child. A pawing forefoot sheared a button from Ware's coat and left him gasping for breath, but he managed to turn, stoop, and snatch up the bleeding boy.

Wailing like a banshee, a young squaw tried to tear the unconscious lad from his arms. Then Far Thunder confronted him.

"My son," he said in a stricken voice.

At once Ware saw his chance. The boy needed medical attention; the parents were panicstricken.

"Bring your squaw and come with me," he ordered. "The women at the stage station will care for him tonight, and tomorrow the wagon which the pony soldiers brought will take you to the soldier doctor at Fort Laramie."

"No!" He Dog objected. "Our medicine man—"

"This boy," Ware broke in, "needs expert attention lest he be a cripple for life. Tell your people to break camp, start now, and meet us at the fort." Followed by the stunned young squaw, he started off, and got away with it.

"Sojer, yuh got nerve, and yuh're quick under the hat," Wetzel jubilated, hurrying along beside him. "If'n yuh hadn't been bullheaded an' come up here, they'd a-mowed us down come mornin'. Bein' here when this happened, an' thinkin' quick like yuh done—walkin' off with the chief's grandson, an' sendin' the rest to the fort—yuh fixed it all slick as a whistle."

* * * * * *

Made comfortable as possible, the injured boy and his grateful parents were bedded down in a vacant cabin. And despite the late hour. He Dog had moved his village off toward the fort. Second Lieutenant Ware had done a job and would wear a silver bar.

Again, from the open doorway of a log building, he gazed at the June moon an hour high over the North Platte Valley, and thought of Theresa Tindall. This time, however, Theresa was not thirty miles away, and he sighed with satisfaction as his arm tightened about her.

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

MEXTOWN GOLD

A Quick-Trigger Action Story by WAYNE PURCELL

Peter Fitts caught the man's wrist, twisting inward

BOOTS AND A STETSON

By RICHARD BRISTER

Besieged by bandits, tenderfoot Peter Fitts proves that clothes make neither a Westerner nor an Eastern dude!

NUMBER EIGHT puffed and struggled up the slight grade, her four coaches buckling and straining behind the tender. Her stack sent a column of sooty black smoke back toward Dawson. In the last coach a young man in immaculate gray flicked a soot particle off his lapel with annoyance.

His name was Peter Darlington Fitts, and he was almost too handsome, with his shock of coal-black hair, his dark flashing eyes and skin as fair as a schoolgirl's. Every woman aboard had been darting come-hithers at him during all the long trek from the Eastern seaboard. Conversely, every Western man on the coach had felt a pressing urge to manhandle him. An uncouth mountain of a man who had imbibed too well lurched down the aisle and shoved his half-filled bottle toward Peter Fitts.

"Take a pull on her, boy."

"No, thank you," Peter said calmly, eyeing the slavering, disordered man distastefully.

"G'wan," the big man growled. "Do yuh good. Put a li'l color in them lily-white cheeks."

The color came quite automatically, and young Fitts said a bit more firmly:

"No, thank you."

"Listen—" the giant started.

Peter Fitts stood up. He was a much more impressive figure when standing. He stood only two inches shorter than the man who faced him. He was built in proportion, and the air of softness about him evaporated.

"Yes?" he said quietly.

The big man's eyes brushed Peter's now cold black ones, and darted floorward. He was all bluster and bluff, it appeared, and his bluff had been called. He turned on his heel and walked down the aisle toward his seat, looking foolish now.

Peter Fitts settled himself and riffled the pages of his *Atlantic*, seeking his place. But when he found it, he could not keep his mind on the words he was reading.

More and more, as the train puffed Westward, he had become aware of the sour effect his Eastern wardrobe was causing. A man is judged by appearance, until you get to know him, and Fitts decided he'd get off at the next long stop and buy at least a pair of boots and a Stetson. His bowler and patent leathers seemed objectionable to his fellow passengers. When he got to the ranch, he would have to demand, and get, immediate respect from the men who would be working for him, if he wanted to make the thing pay as his father had with such spectacular success, before the Grim Reaper called him.

AS ALWAYS, thought of his father sobered him. The first news had reached him only two weeks past in Hanover. Peter Fitts had been in his final year at Dartmouth. He had hated to leave, but as the lawyer said, a college degree was of little importance in the ranching business.

Young Fitts had settled affairs with the college at once, and entrained for the ranch. It was the only legacy his dad had left him. He would have to grab the reins now and keep the place paying, unless he wanted to start out from scratch in some other business.

Besides, the lure of the Frontier was strong in him. Even his dad had never been west of the Mississippi until four years ago, but in that short time he had turned what he called his "flyer at the cattle business" into a real bonanza, with property holdings conservatively rated at well over fifty thousand.

No, thought Peter, he would be a fool not to take up the reins where his dad had dropped them. He would buy himself some more practicable clothes when this train stopped at Encito, and when he got to the Bar B, he would let his men know who was boss.

The train stopped at Encito, though somewhat off its schedule. But Peter Fitts didn't reach there. He stopped forty miles short of Encito, at a water station, and never did get to buy those boots and that Stetson.

Almost the minute they creaked to a halt to take on water, the panic was on with a vengeance. Shots filled the air, mingling with groans of pain and terror. A half dozen riders came thundering down from the engine, their pistols blazing to quell any thought of resistance among the men passengers.

Then two men walked up the aisle from the rear of the coach, methodically stripping every man and woman in sight of money and jewelry. One of the pair, a tall, thin man with a deep scar running the length of his face from forehead to chinbone, surveyed the whole coach with his sharp gray eyes, and flourished two Colts.

The other, a stumpy man with a three-day beard, was hastily cramming money and valuables into a sack he carried. Peter Fitts thought of the four hundred odd dollars in his billfold, and winced. He moved slightly, gingerly trying to wedge the window up without attracting attention.

The tall man with the two guns came down the aisle toward him. His gray eyes swept Fitts from head to foot.

"Well, ain't you pretty?" he said with a bantering inflection. "Put them hands up, Hannah."

"My name is—"

The gun prodded at him. "Reach, Beautiful."

Peter Fitts reached. The man slid one gun under his belt, freeing one hand, with which he expertly searched Fitts. He found the fat wallet without the slightest trouble. He licked his lips and his eyes darted to Fitts' traveling bag. Fitts' name was inscribed on it in gilt lettering, and the man read it, whistling.

"Hey, Shorty!" he called. "Look here."

The stumpy man came up. "Let's get goin'. We—" Then his eyes read the name on the suitcases. "Peter Darlington Fitts!" "Hey! Old man Fitts' kid, hey? Ain't that lucky, now?"

"Stand up!" the tall man said to Peter Fitts.

"You've got my money. I—"

"Stand up!"

Fitts gauged the distance to the man's knees, and the distance between the short man and the tall one. There was a flush in his cheeks, and he was breathing heavily. He put both big hands on the coach seat beside him, as if to pry himself upward in abeyance to orders.

Suddenly he was on his knees on the floor, then lunging forward in a great bearlike grab at those two pairs of knees. The blast of the gun in his ear was terrific, but the shot merely punctured the window and sent glass tinkling. Somewhere in the back of the coach a woman was screaming and men were whooping for him.

He caught "Shorty's" legs with a sweep of one big arm, and knocked the little man down like a duckpin. But the tall man was fast. He was back and out of the way like lightning, and Fitts felt the full weight of the gun butt strike through his bowler. His head felt as if a ton of bricks had fallen on it from a great height. He crumped to the coach floor, and that was all he remembered. . . .

IT WAS raining. There was a fire burning fitfully in the middle of this small clearing. It could not make much headway, and the smoke of it lay heavily all around. Much of it was wafted toward where Peter Fitts lay at the foot of a jack-pine, and it got into his nostrils.

He wanted to cough. He wanted not to as badly. He had regained consciousness only a minute or two past, without the knowledge of the two men huddled over the fitful flames. Once the tall one with the scar down his cheek had come over and drawn a tarpaulin carefully around him. Peter Fitts had wondered at the gesture. Straining his ears as the two men spoke by the fire, he now understood.

"The old man had money," the short man was saying "Must have, Lafe. The kid, too, carryin' four hundred around loose in his wallet."

"The ranch'd bring forty, fifty thousand, in the open market," Lafe grunted. "Old man Fitts was throwin' every cent right back into land, and more buildin'. We can have the kid here write Chaffee a letter and ask for his money. It'll take time, that way, but we can afford to hole up a couple of months."

Chaffee! Peter was stunned. Chaffee was the lawyer who had written him that his dad was dead, and that he had inherited the ranch.

"If you think I'm going to write and have Chaffee sell out, you're crazy," he said.

Lafe, the thin bandit, came over and stared down at him morosely.

"Come back to life, have yuh?"

Shorty was chuckling. "Cocky son, for a dude, ain't he?"

Lafe couldn't see any humor in the situation.

"Yuh'll write to Chaffee, Fitts. Yuh got that lump on yore head tryin' to cross me, remember? There's more where that come from." He tapped his holster.

Peter Fitts tried to stand up, but his head was throbbing and with the simple effort, a great wave of dizziness assailed him. He sat down again. "Try me," he said limply. "I'm pretty stubborn."

Lafe's boot swished through wet leaves and ploughed hard into young Fitts' side. He grunted with pain, but kept his lips clamped tight shut. Lafe kicked him again, and then he was on his feet, raging. He almost got his hands on Lafe's throat, but when the big man pushed him he fell back. Shorty had tripped him. He was going to get up again, but Lafe's gun was out, glinting.

"I wouldn't shoot to kill, kid," Lafe said. "But I'd shore cripple yuh. We need yuh alive, but it don't make no matter about how much alive, till you write for that money."

Peter Fitts could believe him. Lafe was capable of any brutality with forty thousand dollars as a driving motive. That ranch was Peter's motive to resist him. It belonged to him and he had charted his life's route around it.

Besides, he would cut a fine figure with his men, wouldn't he, if they learned he had let himself be kidnaped? They'd have even less respect for him, if he were forced to write Chaffee to sell his holdings to buy freedom for him.

"Maybe I never learned how to write, Lafe," he said.

The scar on Lafe's cheek twitched in what passed for a grin.

"Try again. The whole range is expectin' yuh, Fitts. Every man hereabouts knows yuh was in college, back East, when yore old man cashed his chips."

Fitts shrugged, and the shrug was a challenge. Lafe moved in to kick again, then hesitated. He turned toward Shorty.

"Kid's got his old man's stubborn streak in him. Beatin' him up won't do no good, I reckon. We're in for some pretty tough goin' while we're waitin' on Chaffee to clear things up legal, and get the kid's money."

Shorty nodded. "You beat him much more, he's like to croak, Lafe. That won't prove nothin'."

"You're right it won't," Peter Fitts said.

Lafe stood pondering. "Tie him up, Shorty. Beatin's out, but I got a better idea. We'll starve him. That'll knock him out gradual, until he talks turkey."

Shorty walked toward his saddle and picked up the loop of rope slung on the horn, chuckling. Lafe held the gun on Fitts till Shorty had tied him. The taller man inspected the knots to satisfy himself that Fitts could not get away.

"Yuh might save yoreself a lot of grief, Fitts, by seein' it our way," he said.

Fitts' eyes flashed at him in helpless rage. He was silent.

"Yuh think we oughta make tracks?" Shorty said doubtfully. "The others might—"

"Shut up," Lafe snapped. "They'll think we got it, more'n likely."

Fitts wondered what "the others" would think Shorty and Lafe got but his head started such a terrific throbbing at the slight mental effort that he gave it up for a bad job, and stored the question away in his mind as food for thought later.

Rain continued to fall in a thin drizzle. Lafe and Shorty finally rolled in their blankets for the night. They did not bother standing watches, assuming that his bonds would hold Peter Fitts safe. The minute he heard them

start snoring, he began to work feverishly against the tight knots.

HIS wrists were bleeding badly and he was mentally and physically exhausted by the time the first signs of a rising sun peeked over the horizon. It was grueling work, but he struggled with desperation, knowing his captors would make good their threat to starve him unless he agreed to have Chaffee sell the ranch and deliver the money, somehow, to Shorty and Lafe.

By six o'clock, he was nearly loose. There was just one strand of the rope that held his hands together behind him. He looked longingly at the dying embers of the fire. If he could crawl over there without being noticed and get that single strand in contact with a live piece of charcoal he could make it.

It was a poor gamble, but it was his only gamble. If they woke up and discovered how nearly he had come to getting away, they would make sure of him from henceforth. He wriggled toward the fire, pausing from time to time to assure himself that Shorty and Lafe were still sleeping.

With his back to the flames, he managed at last to get the rope between his two bleeding hands in contact with a red piece of wood. He could smell burning hemp.

A slight move brought his cut wrist in contact with the flame, and he clamped his lips tight against an outcry, his body twisting at the pain.

The movement set twigs snapping wetly beneath him He sat frozen, watching Lafe sit bolt upright in his blanket roll, staring at him with sleepy wonderment.

"Shorty! Wake up! The cursed dude's gettin' away!"

Fitts yanked with both mighty shoulders. Behind him the single rope snapped and his arms came loose. Lafe was knifing one lean hand under his saddle in search of his pistol. Peter Fitts went through the air in a headlong dive.

Lafe had his gun half raised as Fitts hit him. Fitts' knee struck Lafe on the side of the head, not too accidentally. The man groaned and came twisting around, groggy, but still trying to lift the gun. Peter Fitts kicked and the gun flew twenty full feet, lodging in a clump of briar.

Shorty was coming to his feet, sleepy-eyed, but his hands were moving to his gun with incredible swiftness. Peter Fitts rushed at him, yelling like a banshee, and the small man's fingers fumbled. Fitts caught the belt out of Shorty's hands and flung it into the woods, then stood with his back to a jack-pine, panting.

"All right, gents," he said. "You'll have to continue this set-to my way."

Lafe came in at him, gritting at Shorty, "Go for his knees!" Shorty flung himself at Fitts' legs like a terrier. Fitts spread his legs wide and Shorty's small arms tightened in a futile attempt to draw his antagonist's knees together.

Lafe came at Fitts high, thrashing with both fists, and Fitts lanced out with his left hand and caught the thin man on the temple. Lafe cursed and drove in again. Fitts tried to duck, but Shorty held him fast, and Lafe hit him hard in the mouth.

Blood from his bleeding lips caught in his throat, gagged him a little. He grabbed Lafe, handling the thin man as easily as most men would handle a scarecrow. He shook Lafe this way and that and sent him hurtling right into the fire. Lafe let out a howl of pain and rage.

The thin Lafe did not come back for more. His eyes went to the briar clump where Peter Fitts had thrown his pistol and he ran toward it, searching for the weapon.

Lafe let out a howl and dived at the ground, apparently having sighted the gun. Fitts reached down and picked Shorty up bodily, all wiggling arms and legs, and flung him at Lafe.

The little man went through the air howling like a cornered coyote. The sound of Lafe's gun was heavy in the dawn mist and Shorty's howl stopped abruptly with the crash of gunfire, ending in a throaty gurgle. His small body was a lifeless lump when it hit Lafe in the chest. Both men went sprawling.

Lafe got up snarling curses and tried to trigger again before Peter Fitts could close in. His wrist had apparently been sprained, and the gun wouldn't come up to his bidding. In the time he took changing hands Fitts was on him again. He caught the man's wrist, twisting inward. A second explosion sounded, a spurt of yellow flame shot toward Lafe's jacket, and he choked, an incredulous shine in his eyes as he crumbled groundward.

He was dead. Peter Fitts dragged a limp hand across his forehead. They were both dead, and it was the first time in all his twenty-two years he had met the Grim Reaper face to face.

When the sheriff and his posse came up, a half hour later, drawn by the sound of gunfire, Fitts had had time to do some thinking. They discovered a bored young man in the act of cooking breakfast in the presence of two dead bodies.

THE sheriff and his men were impressed. Lafe Porter and Shorty Hines were considered pretty tough. Both had been fast on the trigger, and the deputies marveled at the thought of this young dude, Fitts outrodding a pair like Shorty and Lafe.

Peter Fitts adopted an extreme taciturnity concerning the battle, for a twofold purpose. His new prestige remained intact, and these men thought him admirably modest to boot. He would not have disillusioned them for the world.

(*Continued on page 74*)

Pete's gun gave warning to the choppers

White Renegade

By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

Pete Mobray runs up against gun thunder and tomahawks when he takes the trail of a Fort Defiance Indian trader!

SOMETHING was in the brush off there, less than a stone's-throw—or an arrow-flight—away. Pete Mobray sucked in his breath and raised his lanky height a little in the tall grass, springing on his toes, peering intently. The steady ringing of axes, a little farther back in the trees, covered any sound which a skulking redskin might make.

But this was Indian country. Proof of that was the fact that the *Blackhawk* was forced to tie up to the bank now wherever wood could be found, and nearly all hands had to go ashore to chop fuel for its voracious boilers. It was too dangerous for wood-cutters to live along here and have wood ready for the river boats.

The *Blackhawk* waited now, steam up, sighing like a sleepy giant, ready for an instant get-away if necessary—

It was an Indian there in the brush, all right. A rather pot-bellied warrior with a single feather in his hair, his mouth painted

vermilion like a bloody gash, as though his throat had been cut, and a hideous yellow smear on either cheekbone. He rose up suddenly, opening his mouth to sound the attack, and shooting an arrow even as he came to his feet.

But the surprise wasn't as complete as he had hoped, nor all on one side. Pete's gun discharged while the redskin's knees were still unbending, and as the roar of the rifle gave warning to the choppers, he turned, running for the river like a scared coyote.

The Indian's yell was taken up by a hundred other throats, a savage gobbling to unhinge a man's nerve. With that to speed him on, Pete knew that he was giving a good exhibition of footwork. And he had to. His had been the farthest outpost of all the guards, and it was a long dash back to where the axemen were already on their way. Then it was as much farther on to the bank of the Missouri and the deck of the *Blackhawk*. And it was highly important that he should continue to be a passenger on her, on up to Fort Defiance. He had business up there.

The Indians seemed bent on making him miss the boat. They had misjudged their attack, and most of the crew were getting back to the river without much trouble, which only swelled the wrath of the redskins. Now a murderous fire of arrows and a few smoothbore bullets were being concentrated around Pete.

Ahead, Pete saw "Big Black" plunging along with an armful of cordwood over one shoulder, carrying his big double-bitted axe in the other hand, and running light as a deer. Big Black was farthest back of any of the others. None of them were waiting for him, but Pete couldn't blame them for that. And he was holding his own with the fleetest of the Indians, at least.

There was the river—and there was the *Blackhawk*, swimming like a big duck in a froth of water, already backing out into the stream, with everyone on board except himself. Pete's heart jumped into his throat and threatened to choke him for a moment. But several of those on deck were unlimbering their rifles now, giving him a cover of fire as he advanced. He'd have to swim for it, but he could do that.

He reached the shore, tossed aside his empty rifle. At that instant something hit him like a sledgehammer. His knees buckled and he collapsed in the water. And that bullet, Pete knew, even as night seemed to sweep across the water and overwhelm him, had come from in *front*, had been fired from the deck on the *Blackhawk*. . . .

WAKING up seemed like more of the same old nightmare, with trimmings. There was an Indian bending over him, and the greasy odor of war paint hit Pete almost like a blow. He was surrounded by Indians, he saw them, somewhere back among the trees. The new-cut stump of a tree was right at hand, with a chip upended and boring into his back.

No, it was worse than a chip, he realized now. It was his shoulder and back together and it hurt like the hinges of hell. That was where that bullet had smashed. Though that would be the least of his troubles. To be tortured, in the way he'd heard about, was probably what would be coming next.

Then, as his head cleared, his amazement increased. His wound was being bandaged. Something was applied that stung like fire, but gave way in turn to a pleasant soothing feeling. Then he was being moved carefully. Despite that care, the sudden new lance of agony was so sharp that he fainted.

When he awoke again, Pete was inside a tepee. He saw an Indian squatting cross-legged beside him, and recognized him as the same man who had fixed his wound.

"Feeling a little better now?" the Indian asked casually.

Pete blinked, tried to sit up, and groaned.

"You're a white man!" he gasped.

"You can call me that, if you like. I've a white skin."

Pete's face mirrored his disgust.

"Renegade!" he spat.

His companion shrugged. Still daubed with war paint, his head shaved to a scalp lock, features aquilinely pointed and set in a sardonic cast, the imputation did not seem to trouble him.

"Call me that, if you like," he agreed. "But remember a couple of things. One is that you would be dead now, but for me. And the other is that you were shot by one of the men on your own boat. And that couldn't very well be an accident."

Pete remembered now. That bullet, catching him just as he had been about to dive and swim for it. No, it couldn't have been an accident.

"Looks like there was somebody on that boat who didn't want you to get to Fort Defiance," the other man went on. "Makes me—and the rest of us here—renegades and painted heathens, don't it?"

"What you got in mind?" Pete demanded roughly.

The pallid ghost of a smile touched the renegade's lips, leaving his face bleaker, more savage than before.

"That's talking," he approved. "I'm called the Wolf. Maybe it fits me. But I'm not a renegade without cause. And I figure that you've reason to be a renegade now, too."

"You figure wrong, Wolf. Go howl somewhere else."

"And leave you for my friends to play with? Two of our bunch were wounded and another one was killed. Which leaves my noble red brothers justifiably thirsty for blood. And yours would do."

Despite himself, Pete shivered a little. The

"Wolf" had saved him, up to now. And he wasn't anxions to die—certainly not now, when there was a lot of work to be done.

"Go ahead," he agreed sullenly.

"Those men—your white friends—" the Wolf began, "posted you off where they knew you didn't have a chance. Then, when you managed to fool them and almost make the boat, they stopped you with a bullet. Now, you have two choices," he went on sardonically. "Throw in with us and get revenge—or I'll let *my* friends choose which one is to have that nice red thatch of yours."

"You've no principles left, even if you are a white man, have you?" Pete asked.

The Wolf shrugged again.

"Principles," he said "are something of a luxury in this country, to a man who places a higher value on his hide than the bounty that others would give for it."

In the weeks that followed, Pete discovered that the Wolf's whole philosophy seemed to be summed up in that one sentence. But he owed his life to the Wolf, and whatever the purpose of saving it, it was something which, as his wound healed and his strength returned, he cherished as grimly as the Wolf valued his own. And, he admitted wryly, for much the same reason.

The Wolf seemed bent on revenge against those who had wronged him—the men of his own race. Pete wanted revenge on one man. His suspicions had pretty well crystallized now, incredible as they had seemed at the first.

He had been a passenger on the *Blackhawk*, with Fort Defiance his destination, for a certain job he had to do.

Fort Defiance belonged to the Upper Missouri Fur Company, and the Upper Missouri was just another name for Angus MacLeod. Although Angus might be the company, he was forced now by the misery in his bones to remain at St. Louis, however much he chafed at the restriction. And while he stayed a thousand miles down the river, there was considerable action of a nefarious nature at the outposts of the fur trade, action which Angus could not control despite the orders he might issue.

It all boiled down, simply, to one word. Whiskey. The Indians wanted whiskey when they came to trade, and Angus MacLeod's factors argued, with considerable truth, that the trappers would take their furs to wherever they could get whiskey in exchange.

AND that wasn't far. A new law, recently passed by the United States Congress, declared that whiskey was taboo for the noble red man. But the border wasn't far away. And the posts of the Hudson's Bay were not hampered by any such law or restriction. Therefore, the traders argued, why place themselves under such a needless handicap, with the law so far away?

Angus, a strict teetotaler himself, insisted that the law be obeyed at his posts. But some of his factors were going on the theory that what the old man didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Whiskey was an item of trade at Fort Defiance despite his edict.

Finally he sent Pete Mobray up-river as his personal representative, to put a stop to the practice.

"There's one mon who heads the whole shamefu' business, for the profit," Angus had stormed. "Who he is, I dinna ken, for he's a fair smooth article. But 'tis up to ye, laddie, to find out who he is—and to put a stop to it! I'm trustin' ye, d'ye ken!"

That had been Pete's job. For the first few hundred miles up-river, ostensibly only a passenger, Pete had had no inkling that anyone on board the *Blackhawk* suspected his real job or had reason to resent it. But his suspicions had grown when accidents had begun to happen.

One night, leaning over the rail, something had hit him from behind, almost knocking him senseless. Hands had picked him up and heaved him over the side into the black water. The *Blackhawk* was then proceeding steadily up-river, and that should have been the end of Pete Mobray. But the shock of the cold water had revived him so that he had managed to keep afloat, while a rousabout who had heard the splash had given the alarm.

Pete said nothing about the incident, but he kept his eyes open from then on. There had been other suspicious happenings, but he was unable to fix on anyone who might conceivably be guilty. . . . Until the Indian attack, and that bullet from the decks of the *Blackhawk*.

Even now his suspicions were too incredible to believe.

And then, one day, the Wolf appeared suddenly, carrying a small mirror in his hand.

"A lady once owned this," he said. "But that doesn't impair its value," he added with a bitter smile. "With it, you can get a look at your wound, now it's healing. Do you know anything about bullets, and the work they do?"

"A little," Pete confessed, and he eyed his wound.

Here was proof of his suspicions, however wild they had seemed. Even at this stage of healing, his wound showed clearly enough to a skilled eye that the hole had not been made by any heavy, ounce shot from the smooth-bores. Rather, it was a smaller slug one about forty to the pound, from one of these newer, fancy rifles. And only one man on the *Blackhawk* had owned such a gun!

Now he could believe the thing he'd seen—the gun in Jabez Hait's hands, centering on him, the belching smoke, and the staggering blow as he collapsed in the river.

Yet Jabez Hait was the last man in the world he would have suspected, or had suspected, up to that moment. A scientist, traveling up-river

to study the animal life along the stream, he had been in Angus MacLeod's office while Pete was there. He had been introduced to Pete by old Angus, and had professed himself vastly interested in the frontier, and profoundly shocked at the implications of the whiskey trade. Certainly he had fooled Angus.

But now, Pete knew, it was Hait none the less who was agent for the whiskey ring, and he had aimed to foil Angus by killing him, Pete. And while he languished here in an Indian camp, some fifty miles farther down-river than the point where the attack on the *Blackhawk* had occurred, the whiskey was still flowing, and Jabez Hait remained alive.

The Wolf grinned at him, thin-lipped.

"A few more days and you'll be good as ever," he said. "You wouldn't be honing for revenge, would you?"

"On one man, yes," Pete agreed..

"On a tall, prosperous-looking man dressed in black, with mutton-chop whiskers, and always smoking a cigar?"

Pete stared.

"How did you know?"

"I saw him center his gun on you, and pull trigger," the Wolf shrugged. "Otherwise, you'd have made the boat easily enough. Well, I've word that there's a boat coming down-river again, and it should pass here in a few days. I've a strong suspicion she's the *Blackhawk*. They've had about time enough to reach Defiance and get back this far. When they get here, we'll turn the tables."

"How?"

"Easy," said the Wolf. "You and I will go out to the edge of the river when she comes along. Two white men, stranded, wanting to be picked up. We'll choose our spot, of course —and when they're busy picking us up, the Indians will swarm out and attack. This time we'll get them before they have a chance."

Pete regarded the Wolf with mingled feelings. He owed his life, and the good treatment which he had received for the last several weeks, to this man. And there had been times when he had almost come to like the renegade. But now he could scarcely keep the loathing out of his voice.

"There's just one man that I've a grudge against," he said shortly. "That man is Jabez Hait. He likely won't be on board. Even if he was, I wouldn't do it. The others aren't responsible for what happened to me. They probably figured to stand off-shore and pick me up. They must have supposed that I was killed by someone on shore. I won't do anything to get them in bad, just on account of one man."

"No?" The Wolf grinned thinly, looked at one of the chiefs, lounging nearby. "The boys here want white scalps, and they aren't particular. When the boat comes along, that's what we're going to do. And don't make any mistake, feller. You'll play your part. That's what we kept you alive for."

THE boat was coming around a bend, nearly a mile up-river. As soon as his eyes rested on her, Pete's last hope was gone. She was the *Blackhawk*, all right—and he was to help lure her to destruction. Incredulous though they might be, her officers would recognize him, and be doubly anxious to help him. And when they turned to do that, it would mean their own destruction.

No one would suspect that this spot could have been chosen for an ambushment. Hereabouts the shores looked barren enough—and that was a part of the trick. It didn't seem to afford any cover for attackers. Yet Indians were concealed at strategic points, so well concealed that, even knowing where they were, Pete couldn't even see them.

But that wasn't the kernel of the plan. Pete knew now why this particular spot had been chosen. In the weeks since the *Blackhawk* had gone up-river, the mighty Missouri had played one of its habitual pranks again. A new sand-bar had formed, out here, where before there had always been a deep channel. The Wolf, who seemed to know the river very well indeed, had made his plans accordingly.

Hailed for help, the *Blackhawk* would pause, start to swing in-shore, confident at sight of him that the river was still safe there, or he would warn them. Caught suddenly by a strong current, she would be aground and a helpless prey before she knew it. It could hardly fail to work.

"We'll run out and yell, in a minute now," the Wolf warned. "And don't make any mistake, Pete. If you try to give things away, you'll be riddled with arrows before you get your mouth open. And it won't do you any good, or help them any, either."

Pete clamped his jaws. He had made no promises, but he knew the Wolf meant what he said. None the less, when the time came, he aimed to give a warning, and take his chances.

Now they were splashing out, shouting, waving. The *Blackhawk* saw them, men clustered eagerly on her decks. Then the course of the boat was altered a little. Pete could see Captain Walters, could make out the faces of others he knew, including the giant Big Black.

They were still wading forward a little, he and the Wolf, were almost waist-deep now. In a few more moments—

"There's your friend Hait," the Wolf said casually, loudly. And then, in a hissing whisper "Dive and swim for it! Quick, man!"

With the words, the Wolf was doing precisely that—his long, clean, powerful strokes cut the water like a knife. For an instant, thoroughly startled, Pete watched him. Then he was recalled sharply to reality by the sudden hum of an arrow past his ear, and he, too, started swimming. Indians were springing up from their hiding places, shooting in a desperate attempt to stop them.

Swimming under water, lungs almost burst-

ing, it was too much of a puzzle for Pete. But the Wolf was trying, with him, to reach the *Blackhawk*, and his action had betrayed the Indians into showing themselves too soon, had given warning to those on board even more effectively than a shout could have done.

As he came up for air, Pete saw that the *Blackhawk* had changed course again, was staying out far enough for safety. And from her deck now, rifles could be seen and heard.

Bullets scattered disconcertingly among the Indians, creating a diversion for the swimmers. And then a bullet popped in the water so close to Pete's head that he could hear the chug of it. With white rage choking him, he dived again and began to swim.

The next time he came up, the Indians were in full and disordered retreat back from the shore, the attack completely frustrated. By now he was too close to the boat for Jabez Hait to risk a shot at him. Ropes were thrown to them, and he and the Wolf were pulled speedily on board.

Surrounded by exclaiming friends, Pete didn't stop to answer. He was starting to shoulder his way toward Hait, but the Wolf was ahead of him.

"Your friends the Blackfeet didn't get the boat this time," he said. "But I suppose they'd be glad to welcome you again, if they had, Shook, you all being birds of a feather. This time I'm arresting you and taking you back to the law. Remember me? Culbertson is the name."

The Wolf, or Culbertson, was turning back his shirt, revealing a deputy United States Marshal's badge pinned there. While Pete stared in increasing amazement, Hait, or Shook

[*Turn page*]

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stared as well. Shook! The most notorious outlaw and renegade on the border!

Then, so quickly that no one could stop him, Shook had turned, leaped over the rail, and was swimming under water. Captain Walters stared.

"Shook!" he repeated. "Was *he* that devil? We can still stop him from reaching his redskin friends on shore—"

He was reaching for his rifle again, but Culbertson laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Let him go, if he prefers it that way," he advised, that crooked smile on his face again. Then he turned to Pete. "Sorry I couldn't tell you what it was all about, Pete," he said. "But the chief and some of his men knew English, and they were always where they could overhear anything we said.

"The only chance of either of us getting away was to fool them as we did. And I wanted to get away from them, and get Shook, about as badly as you did. With him out of the way, I don't think there'll be any more whiskey trouble at Angus' posts."

"But man, the Blackfeet are his friends!" Captain Walters protested. "He's one of them—the bloodiest, worst renegade on the whole border. I think I can still drop him—"

"Let him go," the Wolf repeated. "I made him think they were Blackfeet. As a matter of fact, they're 'Rees—and they know that he's a Blackfoot as well as we do. If there's anything a 'Ree hates worse than a white man, it's a Blackfoot!"

BOOTS AND A STETSON

(Concluded from page 68)

There would be a nice reward for this morning's work, said the sheriff, something around five hundred dollars. Peter thanked him, and said:

"Reckon I'll be moving along to my ranch, Sheriff. I mean to pick up the reins up there right where Pop dropped them."

He said that, standing there in his crumpled dude's outfit, a kid fresh off an Eastern campus. The clique of men around him nodded wisely, unblinking.

"Chip off the old block, if there ever was one," they thought. "Blood tells, every time!"

THE RIO KID AT HIS FIGHTING BEST IN

WAGONS TO CALIFORNIA

By TOM CURRY

Next Issue's Complete Frontier Novel

(Continued from page 8)

rules which they neither understood nor cared for, and thus they rebelled against society and society's ways and turned outlaw.

All the business between the principal towns and outlying trading posts necessitated overland travel. Sometimes salesmen or other business representatives found it necessary to handle considerable sums of money and to carry it, poorly protected, through wild stretches of country where anything might happen.

There was so much lawlessness and so little real law enforcement that if one had anything of value and was alone he was very apt to look upon anyone approaching in the nature of an outlaw and would be apt to have a mental picture of a holdup.

The fact that many business men and salesmen who carried large sums of money were not equipped with the necessary six-gun art or confidence in their own shooting ability to be able to ward off attacks by outlaws, and became easy marks for those with a desire to annex the other fellow's worldly wealth, might have been the cause of some men becoming outlaws.

Others had followed the owlhoot trail before coming to Oklahoma and naturally found this section excellent territory in which to pursue their trade or profession, whichever they pleased to call it.

The Dalton Gang

No chronology of Oklahoma badmen or outlaws would be complete without mention of the Dalton Gang, and their outlaw career is a reminder that in one respect horses are like people.

Old-time Western horsemen know that many times a horse will be a docile saddle horse and then for some unknown reason will turn outlaw and thereafter become a bucker ready to try and heave a rider into the next world whenever saddled. Other horses are found to be outlaws when they are first saddled. So it is with people. Some seem to be inherently inclined to follow a life of crime, while others seem to be upright, honorable people and all at once depart from the straight and narrow path and become vicious outlaws.

It has not been proven that the Dalton boys inherited their outlaw nature, although their mother was a Younger, a cousin of the famous outlaws, the Younger Brothers, whose deeds rivaled those of the James Boys. There was however no stain of outlawry in the Dalton's forebears for several generations back. Could it then be some cruel disillusionment? Was it an unfair or unkind act of some representative of organized society that sent them on their criminal career?

In 1860, their father, Louis Dalton, who had married Adeline Younger in Kentucky, moved to a farm near Coffeyville, Kansas, and here the boys were born and grew up. In 1884 the oldest son, Frank, went to old Indian Territory and was commissioned as a deputy United States Marshal. He became widely known as a brave and trustworthy officer.

[*Turn page*]

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His young brother Bob, more adventurous than any of them, came to visit him and was with him in 1885 when Frank was slain in a gunfight with horse thieves. Bob fought like a veteran and gave a good account of himself and still managed to escape when he saw the battle was lost. Bob, when only about twenty years of age, was appointed deputy United States Marshal, with duties in the Federal courts at Wichita, Kansas, and Fort Smith, Arkansas.

Another one of the boys, Bill, drifted to Montana, then to California and became a member of the state legislature. Gratton and Emmett drifted out to California, but in the meantime Gratton had also taken a turn at being an officer in Oklahoma, and while Bob and Gratton were officers of the law and Emmett was little more than a boy, it is said that the three stole a herd of horses and that it was with the proceeds of this robbery that Emmett and Gratton went to California.

Early in 1891, just two years after the opening of the Cherokee Strip, Gratton was arrested and charged with the attempted robbery of a Southern Pacific express train at Tulare, California, in which the fireman on the train was killed. He was tried and convicted, but escaped as he was being transferred from county jail to the state prison.

Pages of Outlaw History

The father, Louis Dalton, had died, the mother had moved to Oklahoma near Kingfisher, and although there was a price of $6,000 upon the head of Grat, the three brothers—Grat, Bob and Emmett got together in Oklahoma and then things really began to happen and they immediately began adding page after page to Oklahoma's outlaw history. Bob had already made plans to form an outlaw band and had recruited such characters as Bill Doolin, Dick Broadwell, Bill Powers and Black-faced Charlie Bryant. Doolin, Broadwell and Powers were ex-cowpunchers. No one seemed to know from whence Bryant came, he had drifted in and having at one time got his face dangerously close to a powder explosion which had left splotches of burned black powder beneath his skin, he had acquired the nickname of "Black-faced Charlie."

Bob must have been proud of the fact that his lineage went back to the famous outlaws, the Youngers, and he seemed determined to build up a gang whose exploits would overshadow any depredations ever committed by the Younger Brothers or the James Boys.

They started off with a series of insignificant depredations, then began on large scale. First they had to gather about them a string of the very best and fastest horses and accordingly they made a raid on a colony of Missourians who had settled near the Indian Territory boundary, stole a number of fine horses and made a dash back toward the Indian Territory. A posse took their trail and in the ensuing battle two of the posse were killed and the outlaws escaped.

A Train Holdup

Red Rock, Oklahoma, was a little Indian trading station built upon the red clay prairies in the Cherokee Strip. It was a small place then and still is a village where the state highways do not touch it, and most of the Santa Fe trains hoot disdainfully as they whiz by. It is near the headquarters of the once famous 101 Ranch.

The depot was situated about a mile from the town, and so the bandits planned to hold up the Santa Fe train at this point because they were sure that they could work quickly without fear of interference by the officers of the little community.

About nine o'clock on the night of June 1st, 1892, the Dalton gang, after concealing their horses in a nearby ravine, waited in the shadows for the arrival of the southbound train. As the small wood-burning engine labored into the station and came to a stop, a blanketed Indian, with a squaw and two papooses, alighted.

The telegraph operator ran to the engine to give the engineer his orders when Black-faced Charlie Bryant and Dick Broadwell dashed past him and leaped into the cab of the locomotive. An armed guard sat on a pile of wood on the tender, but in the excitement of seeing the bandits, he leaped to his feet, causing the sticks of wood to roll beneath him and so he fell sprawling across the coupling into the cab of the engine at the feet of the two outlaws and was quickly disarmed.

The express messenger and his guard were also taken by surprise by others of the gang and were quickly disarmed.

Back in the passenger coaches, Bob and Emmett Dalton and Bill Powers were herding the frightened passengers out onto the station platform, and the robbery was moving forward in a systematic manner, but it was a disappointment, there had been a slip somewhere, there was no big safe full of money as they had expected, only a small box containing a few hundred dollars.

A Grim Murder

While the holdup was in progress Black-faced Charlie Bryant left Broadwell in the engine to hold his prisoners there and ran back to assist the others. In passing the station window, he saw that the frightened operator was busy at the telegraph keys. Assuming that the operator was sending out news of the robbery, Bryant sent a bullet crashing through the window, and with a moan the operator slumped in his chair and died.

It was all over within fifteen minutes. The frightened passengers were herded back into the coaches, the train was under way and a disappointed gang of outlaws were riding away knowing that they would be hunted just as diligently by the law as if they had stolen many thousands of dollars, because while they themselves held life cheaply, especially if it was the life of the other fellow, they knew that the killing of the telegraph operator would bring the law hot upon their trail.

It was not long after this train robbery that Black-faced Charlie Bryant appeared at a cowboy dance near Hennessey, got into an altercation, was badly wounded and was captured by the law before he recovered from his wounds.

[*Turn to page 78*]

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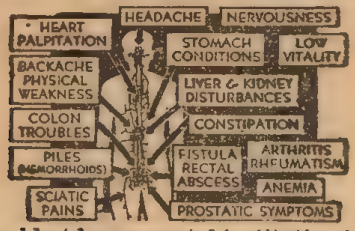

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Bryant was captured by Deputy United States Marshal Ed Short, but while being taken on the train to Wichita, Kansas, to be lodged in the jail there, although he was handcuffed, he got hold of the express messenger's gun while the marshal was absent from the express car.

Just as he was preparing to leave the car the marshal surprised him by returning. A gun-battle ensued in which both Bryant and Marshal Short were fatally wounded. They both died a few minutes after the battle, both died on the platform of the next station, Waukomis, Oklahoma, and each requested that their boots be removed from their feet before they died.

A Daring Crime

For a time the Dalton gang apparently dropped out of existence, then in about six weeks they broke out again over in the Cherokee country near the Arkansas line, where they perpetrated one of the most daring train robberies ever attempted.

They knew there was considerable money being shipped on the Missouri, Kansas and Texas passenger train that day. They knew also that it was heavily guarded, but in the midst of one of the hottest gun battles that ever took place upon such an occasion, they robbed the mail express car and the passengers.

Several of the Indian police and passengers were wounded, one passenger was killed, but the robbers carried out the robbery in a cool manner despite the gunfire directed at them and if any of them were wounded it was never known.

While every officer in the Southwest was looking for the Dalton gang, ambitious Bob Dalton was dreaming of staging a robbery that would eclipse anything the Youngers or the James boys ever perpetrated, something that would make the Dalton gang a reputation that time would not dim.

He dreamed of robbing two banks at one time, two banks in the same town, and that town was his boyhood home town, Coffeyville, Kansas.

The End of the Gang

It was their Waterloo, the end of the Dalton gang. Every outlaw who took part was killed except Emmett Dalton, and he received numerous wounds. It was a hot battle with no quarter asked or given.

A friend of mine, a liveryman who took part in the battle against the outlaws, reenacted the battle for me, showing me right where Bob Dalton fell, and where Emmett, in the teeth of hot gun-fire, turned back and tried to drag his wounded brother up onto his own horse behind him.

It's a story of men who never weakened when they stared death in the face, but it's too long a story to tell you now at this meeting, but at some later time I'll tell you of the last big battle of the Daltons, the end of the Dalton gang. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles team up with Jim Bridger, one of the most famous Indian-fighting scouts of the Frontier,

in next issue's novel, WAGONS TO CALIFORNIA, by Tom Curry.

Bridger, Captain Pryor and Celestino were sent to scout the route for the transcontinental railroad by Gen. Grenville Dodge, the great soldier, engineer and railroad builder who has appeared before now in stories of the Rio Kid's adventures.

In the great sink of the Humboldt where the water was so soupy with alkali that neither man nor beast could drink it, the scouts ran across a wagon train where thirst-crazed men and women held a ragged circle and fought off a savage Indian attack.

Let the author tell you about it in his own words—here is a sample of the action in WAGONS TO CALIFORNIA:

"Let's stir up those Indian mustangs, boys," suggested the Rio Kid.

Slugs among the Indian horses started them rearing and fighting at the horse holders; the steep bank had shielded them from the wagon train's fire, but from the ridge they were an easy mark. Fighters on the line looked anxiously around, for loss of their mounts might mean death in the desert. Others sought to place the stinging new guns, thinking that perhaps some of the wagon train men might have worked up and around through the mazes of broken rocks.

Bridger and Mireles continued the steady, accurate shooting, but the Rio Kid paused, his carbine barrel hot, and surveyed the general situation. A tall, stalwart Indian, his face and torso stained black and a feather headdress bobbing on his head, jumped up and began kicking at some of the prone fighters. He pointed at the ridge, and while the Rio Kid couldn't hear his words, evidently he was cursing them and egging them on to the attack. He was obviously a chief, and Pryor took aim at him; the big fellow moved, but the Rio Kid had just pressed his trigger.

"Nice shot," complimented Bridger.

The tall Indian had leaped into the air and come down on his back, groveling in the white sand. Another ran to him, shouldered him and staggered across to the horses; he flung his friend across a mustang and leaped up behind him, spurring up the north bank and dashing off westward along the screen of brush. Following slugs were too precious to waste, and the Rio Kid turned his rifle again on the main gang.

The desertion of the two chiefs, the deadly fire from the ridge crest, settled the fight. Two Indians turned and ran, jumped on their mustangs and galloped after the leaders. A whole section of the line fell out and panic seized the rest of the killers. The rout became general; it was every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost as they made their horses and rushed off.

"Fetch the animals around, Celestino," ordered Pryor.

"*Si*, Gen-e-ral," nodded the Mexican.

Bridger and the Rio Kid found a way down the broken face of the cliff. The Rio Kid jumped the last few feet, landing in soft, hot sand; he came up and started to the people they had helped. He was smiling but as he saw the state they were in, the smile froze on his handsome face and pity struck his heart.

"Saved 'em from quick death, mebbe," he thought, "but I wonder if it was a favor!"

The survivors of the wagon train were near dead with thirst. Their leader, Colonel Jason Gray, was seriously wounded. Medical supplies and water were equally scanty. Pryor, Bridger and Celestino saw the contents of their canteens disappear down swollen throats scarcely wetting them.

Something drastic had to be done and Captain Pryor made up his mind, fast. He whipped the wagon train into motion toward the nearest wells, fifty miles away.

Meanwhile, he sent Celestino on ahead with the fastest horses and all the canteens he could carry, to fill and bring them back. For the wounded leader he rigged a travois and started the long dangerous haul to the nearest ranch—the dwelling of a Mormon named Peter Stone.

[*Turn page*]

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But grim trouble and mystery stalked the ill-starred wagon train every step of its way. The Indians seemed to have precise knowledge of its whereabouts and they clung to it with strange tenacity. They actually seemed to want something the wagon train had—and—though the Rio Kid didn't know it, this was true.

There was something in the wagon train they wanted!

Mystery developed too at Peter Stone's prosperous ranch. There was his strange treatment of his Indian servants and the still stranger behavior of his three hulking sons. And finally there was the sinister mission of Bill Hickman, chief of the Avenging Angels, that deadly band of Mormon police who were often judge, jury and executioners all in one.

These were the three angles of the deadly triangle that the wagon train emigrants and the three scouts found themselves caught in.

Only Bob Pryor's keen mind and the savage fighting heart which made him such a formidable antagonist, backed up by the guns of Bridger and Celestino, stood between the men and women of the train and the agonizing death of Indian torture.

WAGONS TO CALIFORNIA, by the popular Tom Curry, presents mighty exciting exploits in the life of Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid. You'll find it exciting, thrilling and at the same time an engrossing study of the characters of the men and women who carved our Frontier out of the wilderness and the desert. It's one of the finest novels Tom Curry has ever written—and that's saying plenty!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THERE'S nothing we like better than receiving letters from our readers telling us what they think of this magazine. Don't be afraid of hurting our feelings by criticism, either.

When you like a story we want to know because it shows us we've hit the mark. And if you are disappointed in a story, you tell us why and we'll try to eliminate the faults. Savvy? Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, THE RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y.

Now here's our first letter, from an old-time cowboy and lawman:

Your Lee E. Wells is a good writer, and I enjoy his stories, but I can't help pointing out that I knew the Rio Kid myself, and his name was not Bob Pryor. It was James K. Kirkland, and I know because I hunted outlaws with him along the Mexican Border for years. I was known as the Verdigree Kid because I was born near the Verdigree River in Indian Territory. Keep up the writing, but tell the truth about people.—*Lewis Leroy Jackson, Sonoma, Calif.*

This letter brings up an interesting point. Our stories of Western life are so real and vivid that many people believe they are true. Let me emphasize again that all these stories about the Rio Kid are not meant to be history. They are fiction—the events are imaginary.

In order to give them color and background, the author will bring in real characters who lived at the time, like Jim Bridger and General Dodge, or Billy the Kid. And he will tie up things that these people have

done with the imaginary adventures of Bob Pryor.

But Bob Pryor himself is not supposed to be a real person—he is an imaginary, ideal synthesis of the Frontiersman, the intrepid scout and Indian fighter who went out into dangerous territory alone and helped tame it so that the wagon trains of civilization could follow.

So when Mr. Jackson says he knew the Rio Kid and his name was James K. Kirkland, we believe every word of it. Actually there were probably half a dozen men in the West at different periods and different places who were known as the Rio Kid.

A youngster drifting north from the Mexican Border into Nebraska or Wyoming territory might be called the Rio Kid because of his youth and his coming from the Rio Grande country. Or he might just as easily have been called Neuces, or Tex. Nicknames came easy in the informal West.

So, to Mr. Jackson, more power to you and your memories of your own friend, the Rio Kid. Meanwhile, we think you'll find the adventures of our Rio Kid, Bob Pryor, will carry you back to those old exciting days when a six-gun was the law and a stout heart was needed to back it up.

Next letter comes from a lad with a sense of humor:

I particularly enjoyed LORD OF THE SILVER LODE, by Lee E. Wells. Using real historical characters like that gives a solid feeling to Bob Pryor and the things he does in cleaning up the old West.

The only squawk I've got is that most people must have been more than surprised to find Mark Twain—the one and only Mark Twain, playing stooge to the Rio Kid! Ah, me, I suppose an author must take a few liberties if these minor characters are not to elbow the Rio Kid out of the spotlight. Which is okay with me—after all, he's our fighting man and that's what we want!—*Clinton L. Porder, Kennebunk, Me.*

You've answered yourself so competently, Clint, that no further remarks are needed to make your letter any clearer. Come again, we like getting letters from you.

And finally:

The Rio Kid is tops with me. How about doing a story some time which shows him trying to build the real West of towns and cities and people—the kind of a place he'd like to live in when he got a little older and tired of batting around? A man like the Rio Kid would want to have a place to take root after a while, wouldn't he?—*Helen N. MacCloy, Lubbock, Texas.*

Thank you for an interesting letter! The Rio Kid is a wanderer of the danger trails, living a life of action which keeps him from settling down. He is dedicated to causes that do not permit him a life of ease. And so let's ride along with him as he engages in his stirring pioneer adventures, helping to make the West the great, prosperous and law-abiding land it is today.

Well, *amigos,* drop us a line and keep your eyes peeled for that next big novel, WAGONS TO CALIFORNIA, by Tom Curry. We'll be seeing you!

—THE EDITOR.

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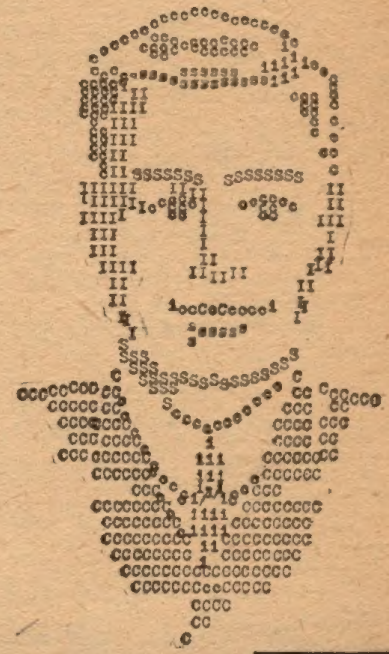

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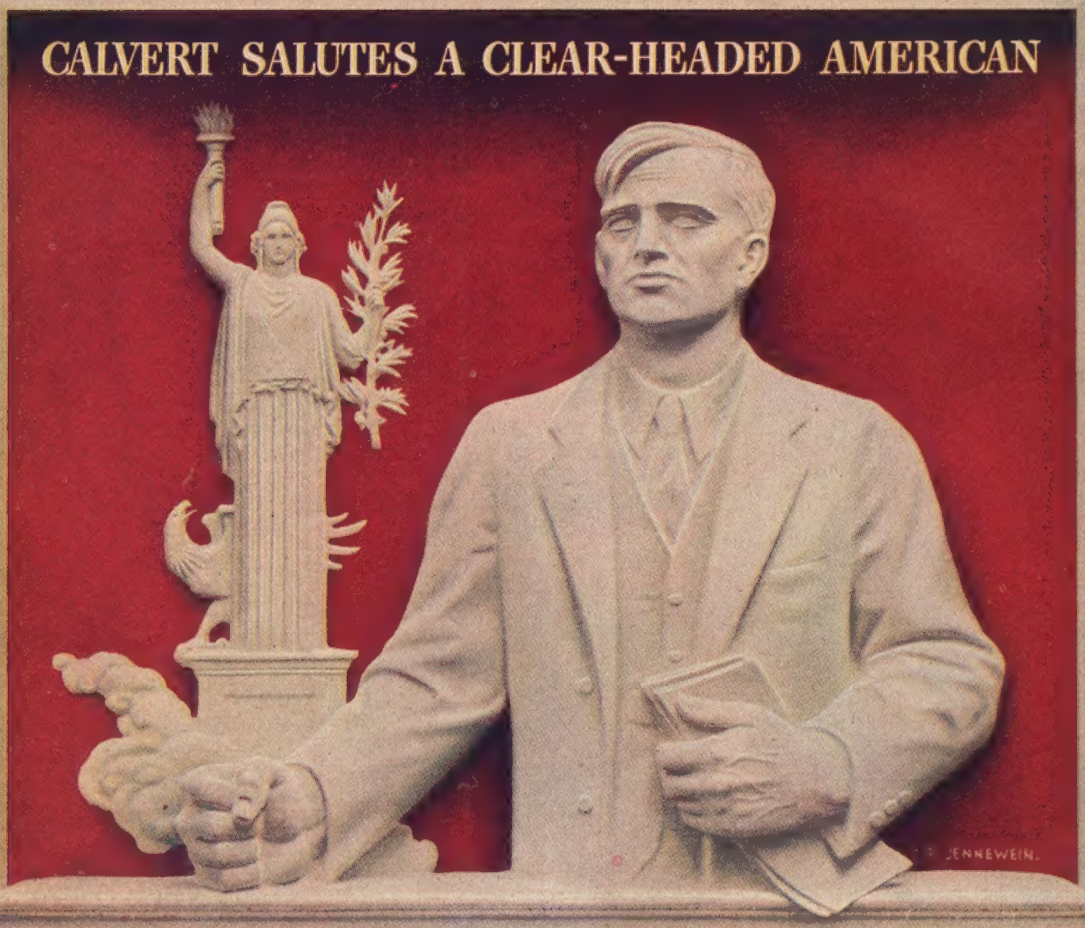

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